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FINAL REPORT

USAID/LAO PDR COVID-19 ASSESSMENT

August 2021

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The views expressed in this publication are of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

FINAL REPORT

USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment

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ACRONYM LIST

ACTS	ASEAN Customs and Transit System
ADS	Automated Directive System
ADWLE	Association for Development of Women and Legal Education
ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
CDC	Center For Disease Control and Prevention
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
COVID-19 Taskforce	The National Taskforce Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
EOC	Emergency Operations Centre
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus group discussions
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOL	Government of the Lao PDR
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labor Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPS	Implementing partner
KIIs	Key informant interviews
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LNCCI	Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Food
MOES	Ministry of Education and Sports
MOH	Ministry of Health
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MSME	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSEDP	National Socio-economic Development Plan
NIPN	National Information Platforms for Nutrition
NPA	Non-profit Association
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RQ	Research Questions
SI	Social Impact Inc.
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
TAF	The Asia Foundation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WB	World Bank
WEI	World Education, Inc.
WFP	World Food Program
WHO	World Health Organization

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is facing the socio-economic and health impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The Government of Lao PDR (GOL) implemented a nationwide lockdown on April 1, 2020, twenty-three days after detecting the first COVID-19 case in Lao PDR (March 9, 2020). A second lockdown was implemented just over one year later (April 22, 2021), in response to a resurgence of cases (Lao PDR's 'second wave'). Despite a low number of reported cases, the implications of COVID-19 and related mitigating actions, such as border closures and lockdowns, have brought significant changes to the Lao economy and to the provision of social services.

PURPOSE

To better plan in this new country context, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Lao PDR commissioned Social Impact, Inc. (SI) to conduct a cross-sectoral assessment of the situation presented by COVID-19. The USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment covers the current effects and potential short-term and medium-term consequences of COVID-19 on six priority sectors (health, governance, economic growth, education, energy, and environment), and recommendations on how to best adapt to emerging challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The unique experience and needs of women and girls, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups are highlighted in the findings and recommendations for each sector.

METHODS

The assessment team conducted a desk review and held virtual key informant interviews (KIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with 85 individual stakeholders representing 35 development organizations (see Annex 1 for the complete assessment methodology). Data collection occurred February through May 2021, therefore findings presented in this report do not reflect the effects of the second wave of COVID-19 outbreak in Lao PDR, which began in April 2021.

COVID-19 EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES ON KEY SECTORS

HEALTH SECTOR



- The strain of COVID-19 on the health sector has **reduced access to health services**, particularly for women, children, and other vulnerable groups.
- In the medium-term COVID-19 is expected to **negatively affect health outcomes** for maternal and child health, nutrition, and strain the capacity of the health system.
- Families have **reduced spending on food** in response to loss of household income due to the pandemic. The resulting reduction in the quantity and quality of food consumption has concerning implications for the nutrition of children, and pregnant and lactating women.

GOVERNANCE



- Responding to COVID-19 has **strained the country's capacity to effectively manage resources for development**, while simultaneously **decreasing national revenue** due to economic downturn.
- COVID-19 has undermined the **effectiveness of the national social protection system** in Lao PDR, particularly for vulnerable populations, which include migrant workers returning from Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Due to the impact of COVID-19, emotional pressure on households could increase women's **vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV)**; understanding the full extent of the issue in Lao PDR will demand continued monitoring and in-depth analysis.

ECONOMIC GROWTH SECTOR



- The Lao economy experienced its **slowest growth rate in 30 years** in 2020, with services, tourism, handicrafts, and certain manufacturing sectors experiencing the most significant declines.
- **Micro and small enterprises experienced significant revenue loss** in 2020 and are expected to continue to struggle in the short-to medium-term.
- More than 200,000 migrant workers (approx. 65% of them female) returned to Lao PDR during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a total of between **\$125-136 million in reduced remittances** and putting significant financial pressures on their households.

EDUCATION



- When **schools closed** during COVID-19 lockdowns in Lao PDR, **only 16.5 percent of children had access to online learning**. Those least able to access distance learning were children in rural areas and non-Lao-Tai speaking households.
- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed **limited capacities to develop online materials and distance learning platforms** in Lao PDR.
- **Student dropout rates are expected to increase** particularly at secondary education level due to school closures and household income pressures; girls, students from remote rural and ethnic minority communities, and students with disabilities are most at risk.

ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT



- Lao PDR has experienced **greater domestic and international demand for and use of electricity** since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Interest in renewable energy** has continued to increase during the pandemic.
- The effects of COVID-19 have had **limited environmental impact** in Lao PDR. However, the economic pressures from COVID-19 may **incentivize unsustainable practices** in pursuit of quick economic growth, which could compromise progress in the country's agenda for sustainable development.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS



HEALTH

Increase the provision of public health information to increase awareness and encourage good health practices such as vaccinating children, good nutrition, and maternal care. Information can be provided through widely accessible platforms such as social media and push MMS and presented in a



GOVERNANCE

Support the National Taskforce Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control (COVID-19 Task Force) and any future emergency committees, particularly at subnational level.

Increase citizen access to legal assistance and social protection services, particularly for

user-friendly manner using visuals and ethnic minority languages.

Support to increase the number of community healthcare workers, particularly in rural and remote areas and their deployment including provision of digital tools for record keeping and information sources, telehealth support from medical personnel via video conferencing, training, transportation, and other allowances.

Consider providing targeted cash transfers to address acute nutrition needs.

vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers and victims of trafficking in persons and GBV.

Support Lao PDR to effectively administer the return of migrant workers from Thailand and elsewhere during the COVID-19 pandemic.



ECONOMIC GROWTH

Invest in business diversification and the development of new value chains to increase entrepreneurship, job creation, household income, and GOL revenue.

Consider designing youth-focused activities or integrating youth considerations into current or future economic growth activities, as appropriate.

Support digital capacity for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and inclusive e-commerce and information and communication technology (ICT) services.



EDUCATION

Strengthen teacher and school capacity to implement blended and distance learning, including the expansion of digital infrastructure and training for teachers.

Provide support to parents and caregivers during lockdown periods.

Consider options to mitigate risk of children dropping out of school during periods of distance learning and school disruptions.



ENERGY & ENVIRONMENT

Support Lao PDR to mainstream environment and green growth across all activities where possible.

Explore activities involving integrated and environmentally friendly planning at provincial and district level.



CROSS-CUTTING

Mainstream emergency planning with implementing partners (IPs) and include it in an activity's workplan and/or memorandum of understanding (MOU).

Support collection of high quality and disaggregated data to identify the specific needs of vulnerable populations, such as women, ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and others; strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of village, district, and provincial authorities in data collection practices and systems.

INTRODUCTION

Like much of the world, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) is facing the socio-economic and health impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. While a swift response limited community spread within the country, the global, regional, and national measures taken to address the pandemic have had effects across the Lao economy and society.

Compared to many countries, Lao PDR has succeeded in keeping overall transmission rates low. As of June 11, 2021, there have been only three deaths and 1,975 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Lao PDR.¹ All deaths and most cases were from the second wave, which began in April 2021.² The low number of COVID-19 positive cases in Lao PDR is, at least in part, attributable to the rapid response of the Government of Lao PDR (GOL).³ The GOL activated the National Emergency Operation Center immediately after confirmation of the first COVID-19 outbreak in China in December 2020. The GOL also introduced quarantine measures, school closures, and a suspension of mass gatherings and tourist visas. On April 1, 2020, just twenty-three days after detecting the first COVID-19 case in Lao PDR (March 9, 2020), the GOL implemented a nationwide lockdown. A second lockdown was implemented one year later (April 22, 2021) in response to a resurgence of cases in Lao PDR.

Despite the low number of reported cases, the global pandemic and its related national and international restrictions pose a serious impact to the Lao economy, education, and health system. Before the COVID-19 crisis, Lao PDR sought to graduate from Least Developed Country status by 2024; the target has since been extended until 2026 due to the impacts of COVID-19 on the country. The current and potential effects of COVID-19 are crucial factors in how effectively the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) will support Lao PDR along its path to a sustainable development agenda.

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

USAID/Lao PDR commissioned Social Impact, Inc. (SI) to conduct a cross-sectoral assessment of the situation presented by COVID-19. In particular, the assessment focuses on the following:

- the **effect of COVID-19** on USAID's active and potential sectors of interest in Lao PDR
- the potential **short-term and medium-term consequences of COVID-19** on current USAID activities in Lao PDR and potential sectors of interest
- **recommendations** on how to adjust and adapt programming activities in the short and medium-term to respond to emerging challenges
- the unique circumstances and **needs of women and other vulnerable groups** (e.g., ethnic groups, children, people with disabilities, migrant workers).

The assessment focuses on six priority sectors for USAID/Lao PDR: health, governance, economic growth, education, energy, and environment.⁴ The unique experience and needs of women and vulnerable populations are addressed in the effects, consequences, and recommendations for each sector. The research questions guiding this assessment are available in Annex 5: Scope of Work

¹ WHO. (2021). COVID-19. Lao People's Democratic Republic. <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/la> [Accessed June 11, 2021]

² The second wave in Lao PDR is considered ongoing as of June 11, 2021.

³ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

⁴ Findings and recommendation for energy and environment sectors are combined in this report.

The primary users of this assessment are USAID/Lao PDR and its implementing partners (IPs). The assessment aims to suggest improvements to programming and considerations for country-level strategic planning. The assessment does not evaluate the performance of USAID activities or provide a comprehensive analysis of GOL and donor response to COVID-19 in Lao PDR.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment team used a qualitative approach that included a desk review, key informant interviews (KIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). The desk review included over 80 documents from USAID, development partners, GOL, and regional studies (see Annex 3 for a full bibliography). The team held virtual KIs and FGDs with 85 individual stakeholders representing 35 organizations, including USAID/Lao PDR, IPs of 10 USAID activities, development partners, non-profit associations (NPAs), and other regional entities (see Annex 2 for a full list of stakeholders interviewed).

The desk review for this assessment was conducted between February and May 2021, concluding just as the second wave occurred in Lao PDR. Due to the delayed availability of new data, most findings presented in this report do not include updated information on the effects of the second wave, which began April 2021. Additionally, many of the studies from Lao PDR were based on small sample sizes or highlighted the effects of COVID-19 without providing evidence. Many available studies lacked disaggregated data. To mitigate these limitations the assessment team focused on studies with larger sample sizes, triangulated findings across data sources, and drew attention to gaps in the data in reporting. The full assessment methodology, methods, and limitations is available in Annex 1.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The following sections contain responses to the research questions (RQs) by sector, including the major effects of COVID-19, the anticipated short- and medium-term consequences, and key recommendations. Cross-sectoral effects and consequences are included in each sector as relevant and highlighted in the report's conclusions. Prior to the sector-specific sections are findings and recommendations related to the nation-wide emergency response effort that required the coordination of GOL and development actors across sectors.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE

NATIONAL STRATEGY

The National Taskforce Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control (COVID-19 Taskforce) was established by the GOL to coordinate response efforts. The initial focus was on prevention and reducing the spread of COVID-19 through social distancing, testing, surveillance, and restrictions across all sectors. A Communication Taskforce was established by GOL and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), with support of USAID, to implement a Risk Communication and Community Engagement plan. This increased multi-sectoral coordination across GOL, NPAs, and others according to interviews with development partners. The National COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Strategic Plan 2020-2025 was endorsed in November 2020 to strengthen resilience and readiness of health systems for future emerging infectious diseases and to strengthen national capacity to respond to public health emergencies more sustainably and effectively through whole-of-system and whole-of-society approaches.

HEALTH RESPONSE

An Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) was established in each province to coordinate the health response. The EOC involves Ministry of Health (MOH) departments, MOH hospitals, military and police hospitals, laboratories, and development partners including the World Health Organization (WHO). With development partner support, surveillance and testing capacity was established together with prevention measures, procedures, and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities were also strengthened in government buildings, hospitals, health centers, and schools. With support from the United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), labs in the Northern and Southern regions were improved with supplies, contact tracing systems, point of entry guidelines, and trainings to lab technicians, epidemiology staff, and clinicians. UNICEF and the WHO are providing support for Mother and Child's Health Centers to develop mobile applications to monitor adverse effects after COVID-19 immunization.

DEVELOPMENT PARTNER RESPONSE

The most common areas of support from development partners were the health response (testing, surveillance, laboratory equipment, PPE), food rations, and provision of learning materials. Other areas of GOL and development partner collaboration included a variety of economic and legal support, including initiatives in agriculture, green tourism, e-commerce, human trafficking prevention and protection of victims, and legal services information. GOL, World Bank (WB), and International Labor Organization (ILO) implemented business loan options and provided tax exemptions to businesses and the Bank of Lao PDR implemented a moratorium on loan payments of one year. The ILO supported the GOL in strengthening the existing social protection system.

CAPACITY TO RESPOND

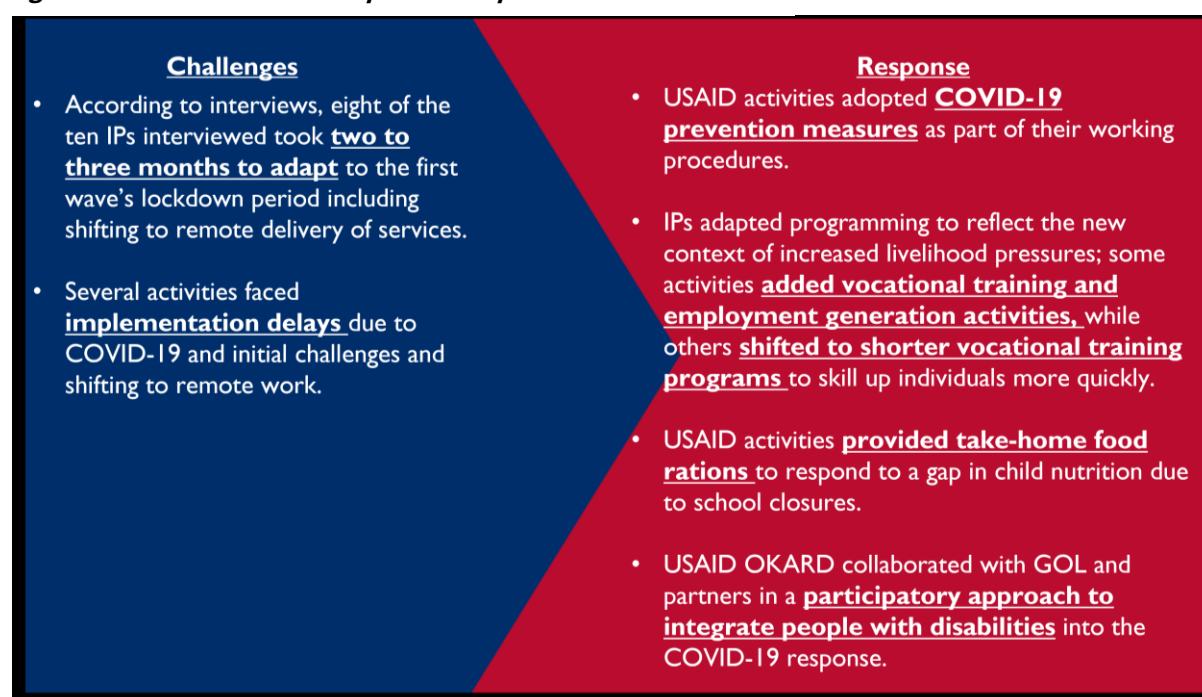
Development partners and USAID IPs that had developed strong emergency plans and preparations demonstrated the ability to respond better and faster, including those with existing agreements with the GOL that did not require new Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). Figure 1 outlines challenges USAID IPs faced from COVID-19 and ways they adapted to respond.

Low Internet Access in Lao PDR

As of 2018, Lao PDR had the lowest connectivity in the region, with only 26% of the population having internet access. Among ethnic groups and rural populations access is even lower. This presents access issues for digital health, education, and economic services that have increased during the COVID-19 response.

Source: OECD. (2019). *Southeast Asia Going Digital: Connecting SMEs*. OECD. Paris.

Figure 1: USAID and IPs Adapt and Respond to COVID-19



COORDINATION

Despite the establishment of a COVID-19 Taskforce in Lao PDR, some development partners observed that there is a need for greater coordination of COVID-19 responses across various agencies and partners. Although many development partners were in place to mobilize support, some emergency response was delayed.

Findings from a regional literature review indicate that increased coordination is required to improve the effectiveness of the response, particularly in education, health, governance, and cross-cutting issues like digitalization and gender equality.⁵ Important elements of successful coordination include the establishment of emergency partnerships and plans in specific thematic areas prior to a crisis.⁶

CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION

Cross-sectoral collaboration and response involving GOL agencies and development partners across different sectors has increased, which has improved response effectiveness and led towards a more whole-of-society approach. Multi-sectoral responses have also been adopted across many of the countries in the region. At the Association of South-East Asian Nation (ASEAN) level, several cross-sectoral initiatives have been endorsed and launched including the ASEAN Covid Recovery Framework, the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund, the ASEAN Regional Reserve of Medical Supplies, the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies, ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System project, and the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangements Framework. These provide an important basis for the response by Lao PDR particularly in addressing some of its own vulnerabilities.

Regional Lesson: Factors of a successful emergency response

From a regional literature review, the assessment team observed four common factors that contributed to the successful COVID-19 response in Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia:

- having strong emergency planning in place,
- prior investments in public health infrastructure,
- whole-of-society response mechanisms reaching down to the community level, and
- clear communication lines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Improve emergency response coordination.** USAID and its IPs could play a role in enhancing coordination of emergency response efforts in areas where USAID is active. Future emergency responses may consider a hybrid model leveraging the capacity of large development agencies such as the UN System and WB and implementing through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other more traditional partners working at the community level as sub-contractors or sub-grantees.
- **Mainstream emergency planning with IPs in an activity's workplan and possibly in MOUs.** Emergency planning across IPs, local partners, and stakeholders can help any activity to prepare for major domestic and global disruptions. Preparation can include the development of robust lockdown standard operating procedures, comprehensive risk assessments, contingency planning, training of staff, and drills of emergency procedures, where relevant. When reviewing or creating activity MOUs with GOL, USAID's IPs could incorporate emergency response provisions within the scope of activities, enabling a more rapid and targeted emergency response.

⁵ Ingram, G. (2020). How international development donors can collaborate in Southeast Asia. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution.

⁶ United Nations OHCA. (2020). Six humanitarian lessons from the COVID-19 crisis. Medium.

HEALTH SECTOR

KEY FINDINGS



- The strain of COVID-19 on the health sector has reduced access to health services, particularly for women, children, and disadvantaged groups.
- In the medium-term COVID-19 is expected to negatively affect outcomes for maternal and child health, nutrition, and strain the health system.
- Reduced quantity and quality of food consumption has longer term health implications for children, and pregnant and lactating women.
- Increasing the provision of health information would support the strained health sector, particularly in digital, multi-lingual, and disability accessible formats.

EFFECT OF COVID-19

ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

COVID-19 caused notable declines in access to routine health services, particularly in rural areas and for disadvantaged groups. Reasons attributed to the reduced utilization of health services include fear due to COVID-19 among patients, redeployment of healthcare staff to COVID-19, limitations to transport due to travel restrictions, and household financial pressures, which led to a reluctance to spend on transport and healthcare charges according to stakeholders and documentation.⁷ In some locations, demand for health services increased due to border closures and the inability to access hospitals in Thailand. The contribution to the GDP from health care service providers increased from 3.6 percent of GDP in 2019 to 4.6 percent of GDP in 2020.⁸ Access to health services is further compromised due to minimal health insurance. A large proportion of the Lao population lack access to health insurance, and this affects access to health services due to difficulties in covering out-of-pocket expenses. For example, according to data from the Lao Statistical Bureau only 15.4 percent of women between the ages of 15 to 49, 10.3 percent of children aged 5 to 17 years and 13.7 percent of children aged under 5 years are covered by health insurance.⁹ Only three percent of internal migrants and 13 percent of cross-border migrants report having health insurance.¹⁰ Rural households also experienced reduced access to healthcare services due to local travel restrictions and the ability to pay out-of-pocket expenses such as registration fees.

Language & Digital Barriers to Accessing Health Information

Ethnic groups had reduced access to online and printed information as much of it is only in Lao. This has reduced learning opportunities and access to information on COVID-19 risks and means of prevention. Mobile phone ownership, mobile internet access, and computer ownership are lower among Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Mien and Sino-Tibetan families compared with Lao-Tai communities.

Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF

The reduced access to health services for women and children is particularly concerning. Maternal health services including antenatal care visits, births at health facilities, and assisted births dropped compared to the previous three years. For example, the number of assisted births at home by a skilled birth attendant, between January and April dropped from 1,438 in 2018 and 1,496 in 2019 to 974 in

⁷ MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Health Beyond the Epidemiology. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

⁸ National Economic Research Institute. (2021). Assessment of the Macroeconomic Situation of the Lao PDR. Vientiane..

⁹ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

¹⁰ OXFAM. (2020). COVID-19 Impact Assessment: Socio-economic impacts on returnee migrant workers in Lao PDR.

2020.¹¹ Routine measles vaccination rates dropped by over 4 percent from 41.5 percent in 2018 and 41.6 percent in 2019 to 37.3 percent in 2020 for the same period from January to June.¹² Similarly, the number of new users of contraception declined by 15 percent between January and June 2020, from 52,974 people in 2019 to 45,330 people in 2020 for the same period.¹³ Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, many women and children under five years old living in remote areas received comprehensive healthcare through integrated outreach services. However, COVID-19 restrictions reduced health workers' ability to provide outreach services or operate community-based nutrition programs. Additionally, women face an increased risk of contracting COVID-19 as nearly 65 percent of the frontline health workers in Lao PDR are female.

NUTRITION

According to a UN survey conducted across 6 provinces in Lao PDR involving 1,200 households, 49 percent of families had reduced spending on food or reduced food consumption during the COVID-19 crisis.¹⁴ The survey found that 15 percent of households were unable to pay for basic food due to reduced household income and loss of jobs. The return of migrant workers put significant financial pressure on many households with more people to feed and less income from remittances.¹⁵ Rising food prices have only exacerbated the problem. A study by UNICEF found that reducing the quantity and quality of food was one of the top three coping mechanisms in response to the loss of household income.¹⁶ Poor nutrition poses heightened risks for pregnant and lactating women and young children. Further, school closures affected nutrition due to the suspension of school nutrition programs.

SHORT-AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

The decrease in routine health services such as immunization, antenatal care, assisted births, and contraception is expected to have health consequences for all people, particularly vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, ethnic groups, and rural households. The decline in antenatal care visits, births at health facilities, and assisted births will affect future health outcomes for women and children. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates an increase in the number of unintended pregnancies by 15-23 percent due to reduced access to routine health services, in particular low use of contraception and children being sold into marriage.¹⁷ An increase in the incidence of unplanned pregnancies could lead to an increased risk of maternal deaths due to the rise in child marriages, decreased accessibility to essential mother-and-child and reproductive health services, and domestic violence. According to UNFPA estimates based on the extrapolation of data on assisted births, maternal deaths are expected to increase by 92 percent in the best-case scenario, representing 262 additional deaths and up to 140 percent in the worst-case scenario representing 400 additional deaths.¹⁸ The longer access to health services is reduced, the greater the chance of future health risks.

FOOD SECURITY

Food security and nutrition are significant concerns in the short-to-medium term due to loss of income and competing household priorities, as well as rising food prices and loss of access to school lunch programs (see Education section below). This may result in reduced food portions, consumption of less preferred and less nutritious foods, and lower spending on preventative health services. Frequent

¹¹ MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Health Beyond the Epidemiology. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

¹² Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

¹³ MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Reimagining Gender. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

¹⁴ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

¹⁵ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank.

¹⁶ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

or sustained disruptions to agricultural supply chains can also affect food security and access to a wider range of food (see Economic Growth section below). Consumption of less diverse and nutritious foods may exacerbate the already high prevalence of malnutrition among children and women of reproductive age.¹⁹ Higher rates of chronic malnutrition could lead to adverse health outcomes for women of reproductive age. Children who experience chronic malnutrition are at risk for increased stunting and wasting, and possibly negative effects on their physical and mental development.

MENTAL HEALTH

According to experts, the prevalence of psychological challenges is expected to increase because of COVID-19, particularly among the most vulnerable households: rural, ethnic minorities, poor, migrant, and persons with disabilities. According to stakeholders, substance abuse is also likely to increase due to reduced economic activities, school closures, and general hardship in the household.

HEALTH SYSTEM

The tight fiscal environment, reflecting reduced government revenue and increased public debt as a result of the pandemic, is likely to present a challenge to the overall health system in the short- and medium-term. Resources in the health sector have already been diverted to respond to the threat of COVID-19; if cases of COVID-19 increase, resources to fund the broader health system will be further strained, jeopardizing all healthcare services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Support village health workers and volunteers.** In areas where USAID activities are operating, support to attract and motivate village health workers and volunteers would be helpful, particularly in rural and remote areas, areas with ethnic groups, and areas with large groups of returned migrant workers. This would support both COVID-19 response efforts, including prevention, and reinforce capacity for routine healthcare services that are at risk of substantially declining for vulnerable groups.
- **Provide targeted cash transfers to address acute nutrition needs.** The provision of cash transfers to pregnant women and mothers of young children, with a focus on poor and highly affected districts, would fill a gap in existing emergency relief and target those most at risk for poor health outcomes from nutritional deficiencies.²⁰ This can build on UNICEF's initiatives that provide a non-conditional cash transfer and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's Reducing Rural Poverty and Malnutrition project that provides conditional cash transfers to low-income households to encourage antenatal care for pregnant women, child vaccination, and growth monitoring for children below two years.
- **Expand the provision of health information** to increase awareness and encourage good health practices such as vaccinating children, good nutrition, and maternal and neonatal care. This can include the development of online content and maintenance of platforms. Content and platforms should seek to target the most vulnerable groups including remote communities, ethnic groups, poor households, women, and children. Information can be provided through widely accessible platforms such as social media and push MMS and presented in a user-friendly manner using visuals and ethnic minority languages. Multilingual health information should be an important consideration. This work aligns with Lao PDR's health sector reform and National Health Development Plan, which have identified health information as a key priority.
- **Promote digitalization in the health sector.** New investments in digital health content and public information systems including websites, social media, and mobile applications should

¹⁹ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

²⁰ Developing A Shock-Responsive National Social Protection System To Respond To The COVID-19 Crisis In Lao PDR

be explored in line with outcome two of the 9th National Socio-economic Development Plan (NSED) and National Health Development Plan, as well as the MOH's E-health strategy.

GOVERNANCE SECTOR

KEY FINDINGS



- Responding to COVID-19 has strained the country's capacity to effectively manage resources for development, while simultaneously decreasing national revenue.
- COVID-19 has undermined the effectiveness of the national social protection system in Lao PDR; particularly for vulnerable populations, including migrant workers.
- There is opportunity for donors to support the work of the COVID-19 Task Force, particularly at subnational levels.
- COVID-19 could potentially lead to an increase in GBV, particularly among women.

EFFECT OF COVID-19

GOVERNMENT REVENUE AND CAPACITY

COVID-19 has significantly decreased the country's revenue and income. Tax revenue fell by 37.6 percent during the first eleven months of 2020 and the fiscal deficit was expected to reach 7.6 percent of GDP in 2020.²¹ The current account deficit is expected to increase to 11.3 percent of GDP in 2020, compared to 8 percent in 2019.²² This was largely due to significant declines in revenue from tourism, foreign remittances, overflight fees, certain manufacturing sectors, and higher debt service obligations. The same study indicates that the gap between official exchange rates and rates quoted by exchange bureaus remains high at 9.1 percent in December 2020. GOL debt and issuer ratings have been downgraded by Moody's Investor Services (Aug 2020) and Fitch Ratings (Sept 2020). Governance capacity has also been stretched during the pandemic, as all levels take on additional responsibilities implementing the COVID-19 response. Due to the immediate need to address the COVID-19 pandemic, some USAID activities outside of the health sector experienced less attention and active participation by their government counterparts who were occupied with the urgent demands of the COVID-19 response.

SOCIAL PROTECTION

COVID-19 has undermined the effectiveness of the national social protection system in Lao PDR. As of June 2020, only 3.8 percent of people in employment were urban wage workers with access to the Social Security Scheme for Enterprises, which covers medical care, maternity benefits, occupational injury, total permanent disability, pension, child allowances and unemployment benefits.²³ As of

Figure 2: Gaps in Social Protection Benefits



²¹ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank.

²² Ibid

²³ World Bank. (2020). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Lao PDR in the time of COVID-19. Vientiane. World Bank.

October 2020, only 12,000 of those eligible claimed benefits.²⁴ According to stakeholders interviewed, many people who claimed and received their benefit faced delays in compensation of between six to nine months. Many stakeholders also noted low public awareness of social protection benefits among the general population.

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Greater pressure on households have made women more vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV), however, additional data and analysis is required to understand the full extent of the issue in Lao PDR. According to global literature, reductions in household income can lead to greater risk of forced marriages and forced labor among young females. Data from the Lao Women's Union (LWU)²⁵ suggests a rise in child sexual abuse during the 2020 lockdown, including an increase in the number of reported rape cases and counselling requests by girls under the age of 18, many of whom have been abused by family members. As a result of lockdowns and other restrictions, many women and children have been confined at home with their abusers while services to support survivors were disrupted (see Governance section for more on reduced access to services). According to a UN household survey, 5.3 percent of male respondents and 4.4 percent of female respondents reported an increase in violence among their neighboring households.³⁹ A study that interviewed hotline counsellors revealed that for married women the primary source of conflict that led to physical and emotional abuse was the distribution of household income.²⁶ In contrast, the Association for Development of Women and Legal Education (ADWLE) indicated no reported violence among a sample of returned workers; however, according to a UN study and stakeholders interviewed, returning women migrants could be at risk of sexual harassment in quarantine centers if facilities are not separated by sex.²⁷

LEGAL AID PROVISION

COVID-19 resulted in a drop of access to legal services, according to stakeholders. Fewer individuals may have sought legal services due to higher priority needs such as livelihoods and household demands. This coincides with increased risk of GBV due to financial pressure on households (see above). According to NPAs interviewed, during the first lockdown period, approximately 90 percent of total calls to seek legal support from legal clinics were from females, which could suggest an increased prevalence of violence against women, however continued monitoring and analysis is required.

SHORT-AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES

FISCAL OUTLOOK

The reduced tax revenue and increasing deficit has created significant fiscal challenges, increased public debt at 69 percent of GDP, and put pressure on the Lao Kip.²⁸ The unstable fiscal framework and low foreign currency reserve buffers led to a downgrade of Lao PDR's sovereign credit rating by Fitch Ratings in September 2020 (from B- to CCC)²⁹ and by Moody's Investor Services in August 2020 (from B3 to Caa2).³⁰ This outlook negatively impacted the country's financial stability and its financing opportunities. In the short- to medium-term, the country may be faced with difficult choices about which investments to pursue. In the long-term, economic growth may suffer as a result.

²⁴ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank.

²⁵ MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Reimagining Gender. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

²⁶ UNICEF Lao PDR. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Safeguarding Women's Health and Entrepreneurship. Vientiane. UNICEF

²⁷ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

²⁸ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank.

²⁹ Ibid

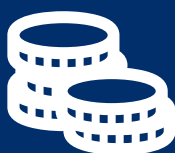
³⁰ https://www.moody.com/research/Moodys-downgrades-Laoss-rating-to-Caa2-outlook-changed-to-negative--PR_429248

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support the **COVID-19 Taskforce** and any future emergency committees, particularly at sub-national level.
- Increase citizen access to legal assistance and social protection services, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as migrant workers. The provision of materials in multiple languages and braille could maximize access to legal assistance for vulnerable groups.
- Support Lao PDR to effectively facilitate the return of migrant workers from Thailand and other countries during the **COVID-19 pandemic**.³¹

ECONOMIC GROWTH SECTOR

KEY FINDINGS



- The Lao economy experienced its slowest growth rate in 30 years in 2020, with service, tourism, handicrafts, and manufacturing experiencing the most significant declines.
- Micro and small enterprises, predominantly women-run, experienced significant revenue loss in 2020 and are expected to continue to struggle in the short-to medium-term.
- More than 200,000 migrant workers (approx. 65% female) returned to Lao PDR in 2020, resulting in a total of between \$125-136 million in reduced remittances.
- Investment in business diversification and the improvement of value chains could increase entrepreneurship, job creation, household income, and GOL revenue.
- Youth employment is poised to remain an important issue for the economic growth sector in the medium-term.
- There is a cross-sectoral need for digitalization, with an emphasis on digital capacity for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) including start-up, inclusive e-commerce, and information and communication technology (ICT).

³¹ The ASEAN Secretariat. (2020). ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration Of Migrant Workers.

ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF COVID-19:

COVID 2020 ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Annual percentage GDP growth in Lao PDR declined from 4.7% in 2019, to -0.6% in 2020. Similarly, annual percentage GDP growth per capita dropped from 3.9% in 2019, to -1.0% in 2020.



Not all industry was negatively impacted by COVID-19. Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing saw an increase in annual percentage growth from 1.2% in 2019 to 3.2% in 2020.



The Manufacturing industry saw a decline in annual percentage growth from 6.7% in 2019, to 5.8% in 2020. Even more severe of a decline was seen in the Services industry, with annual percentage growth declining from 6.9% in 2019, to -3.3% in 2020.



Source:
<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&country=LAO>

EFFECT OF COVID-19

ECONOMIC GROWTH

In 2020, the Lao economy experienced its slowest growth rate in 30 years, with service, tourism, handicrafts, and manufacturing experiencing the most significant declines.³² Although some agriculture and natural resource sectors experienced mild growth during the COVID-19 pandemic, service and tourism-related sectors experienced significant declines because of border closures, lockdown measures, and social distancing. Tourism centers such as Luang Prabang lost over 80 percent of their tourism revenue from March to June 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.³³ Many of the sectors most negatively impacted by COVID-19 – including tourism, handicrafts, restaurants, entertainment, and garments – employ a higher proportion of female staff.

Micro and small enterprises experienced significant revenue loss in 2020. Approximately one-third of Lao households operate family businesses, which are predominantly micro and small enterprises. As of July 2020, 8.4 percent of family businesses had closed, and more than 50 percent of businesses had experienced a fall in revenue following COVID-19.³⁴ The handicrafts sector, which is largely operated by women-run micro and small businesses, was expected to contract by up to 60 percent during 2020.³⁵ A UN report from December 2020 predicted up to 71 percent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are unlikely to survive if there is no economic improvement in the next six months.³⁶ According to interviews with development partners and the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI), low-interest loans are available, but capacity and appetite are low, so take-up has been limited.³⁷ This aligns with reflections of stakeholders interviewed, who perceived that most business support as part of the COVID-19 response has not been distributed equally amongst large businesses and SMEs.

EMPLOYMENT

COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on jobs, with the unemployment rate increasing from 16 percent in 2018 to 25 percent by July 2020.³⁸ An estimated 321,000 people became newly unemployed due to the pandemic (July 2020) including 191,000 domestically and 130,000 migrant workers.³⁹ Travel and tourism jobs decreased by 18.5% in 2020.⁴⁰ Nation-wide figures

³² According to World Bank Lao PDR Economic Monitor (Jan 2021), in 2020 the GDP of Lao PDR decreased to -0.6% (down from 4.7% in 2019). The Lao Statistics Bureau (2021) reports a GDP of 3.3% in 2020.

³³ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P., Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ DIH. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on Handicraft Sector and Recovery Interventions. Vientiane. DIH

³⁶ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P., Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

³⁷ Low-interest loans are available from the GOL, World Bank, and ILO.

³⁸ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank.

³⁹ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P., Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁴⁰ World Travel & Tourism Council (2020). *Economic Impact / World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC)*. [online] wtcc.org. Available at: <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>.

for unemployment among women in 2020 were 32.6 percent, much higher in comparison to 19.2 percent of men who faced unemployment due to the pandemic.⁴¹ According to IPs and development partners, people with disabilities were also affected by the economic implications of COVID-19, however, there are significant gaps in data on people with disabilities in Lao PDR to confirm this.

UNPAID LABOR

Women faced higher unpaid workloads in the household since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic reducing the time they can spend on learning or economic activities. According to a study, before the pandemic, women in Lao PDR spent 4-6 hours a day on household work while men spent 30-60 minutes a day.⁴² Since the pandemic, this gap in household work has further increased.⁴³ Women experienced an increase in unpaid household workload during the lockdown, and thus the opportunity to generate income for women declined. For girls, the increased household responsibilities have negative repercussions on access to education. According to a study by UNICEF, COVID-19 has disrupted education more among girls than boys due to their increased household responsibilities.⁴⁴

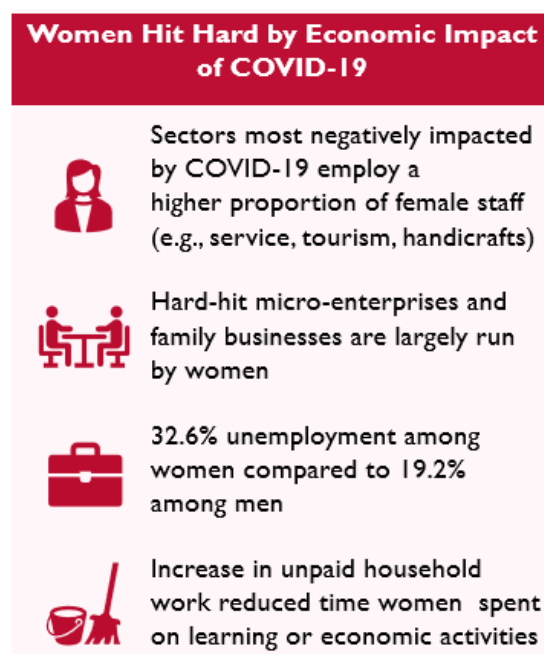
SUPPLY CHAINS

According to LNCCI and other business associations, lockdown periods created significant disruptions in domestic supply chains including blockages. These resulted in difficulties moving goods, particularly agricultural produce from rural areas to district and provincial markets. This mainly affects small and rural producers who lack access to local logistics services and information on how to obtain permits.

MIGRANT WORKERS

About 15 percent of Lao PDR's labor force (300,000) are estimated to be working in Thailand as migrant workers. Of these, over 200,000 returned to Lao PDR in 2020 (approximately 190,000 between March and June 2020), of which approximately 65 percent are women.^{45,46} This has resulted in a substantial decrease in remittances that directly impacts the economic outlook of thousands of households (see 'The Migrant Worker Story' sidebar).⁴⁷ There is no formal mechanism in place to

Figure 3: COVID-19 Economic Effects on Women in Lao PDR



⁴¹ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁴² Sriprasert P., Nguyen A. (2020). CARE Rapid Gender Analysis COVID-19 Lao People's Democratic Republic. Vientiane. CARE Lao PDR.

⁴³ OXFAM. (2020). COVID-19 Impact Assessment: Socio-economic impacts on returnee migrant workers in Lao PDR. Vientiane. OXFAM.

⁴⁴ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

⁴⁵ As of September 2020, it is estimated that more than 200,000 Lao migrants had returned from Thailand. (IOM. (2020). Lao PDR Returning Migrants Survey. Vientiane. IOM.). The total figures for 2020 are not available.

⁴⁶ UN Lao PDR. (2020). Socio-Economic Response Framework to COVID-19. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁴⁷ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank.

THE MIGRANT WORKER

STORY:

COVID EFFECTS ON MIGRANT WORKERS

Migrant workers were one of the hardest hit vulnerable groups by the COVID-19 pandemic.

About 15% of Lao PDR's labor force (300,000) are estimated to be working in Thailand as migrant workers. Approximately 130,500 migrant workers returned home to Lao PDR between March and early July 2020.



This resulted in a total of between \$125-136 million in reduced remittances.

This labor migration has put significant financial pressures on households with less income and extra mouths to feed, resulting in reduced food consumption.



The local labor market has not been able to absorb a major proportion of returning migrant workers. For households, the impact of lost remittances alone is estimated to push between 96,000 and 214,000 persons into poverty.



Source: OXFAM. (2020). COVID-19 Impact Assessment

support migrants who returned in 2020 due to the pandemic.⁴⁸ Most donor support for returned migrants focused on the prevention and protection of trafficking. The ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers, developed in November 2020 in partnership with ILO, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Global Affairs Canada, provides a relevant framework to develop a migrant worker support mechanism.⁴⁹

SHORT-AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES

MACROECONOMIC

Most sectors of the Lao PDR economy are expected to be adversely affected in the short term as they recover from 2020, cope with the ongoing lockdown in 2021, and adjust to the 'new normal'. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to continue to affect tourism, entertainment, and certain manufacturing sectors, such as garments, where much of the workforce are women. In the medium-term, this will put additional pressure on the country's macroeconomic outlook and Lao PDR's sovereign credit rating.

The agriculture sector is expected to expand due to the balance of payments constraints and reduced imports as a result of COVID-19, but short-term approaches to agriculture expansion, including low-quality imported agriculture inputs, might result in adverse environmental effects including deforestation, soil degradation, leaching of toxic inputs to groundwater, and unsustainable land use. These need to be strongly regulated and awareness created across the agriculture supply chain.

One of the projected medium-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic is an increase in the national poverty rate due to regional and national economic distress. This could have a range of negative consequences, such as increased malnutrition and higher school dropout rates among children in rural communities and ethnic minority groups and an increase in child marriages.

EMPLOYMENT

In the short term, the economic effects of COVID-19 will be felt across the population due to declines in disposable incomes and expected business closures, particularly among SMEs. The labor market is expected to not be able to absorb the large numbers of unemployed people. Reduced employment opportunities could continue for daily laborers as well, increasing the likelihood of poor households facing acute rice shortages, hunger, and limited access to diversified food.

Youth and women are most at risk of unemployment and its negative ripple effects. Youth aged 18-24 years are at greater risk of unemployment, which affects their ability to have stable livelihoods and incomes.⁵⁰ Women are also expected to face continued high rates of unemployment and loss of income due to their high participation in the

⁴⁸ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank

⁴⁹ The ASEAN Secretariat. (2020). ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration Of Migrant Workers.

⁵⁰ MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Adolescent Wellbeing and Mental Health. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR.

most impacted sectors. This is expected to have multiple ripple effects impacting the health of women and children. In Lao PDR, household income distribution is the primary source of conflict that leads to physical and emotional abuse of women. With financial insecurity increasing from COVID-19 impacts, women are at increased risk of GBV.⁵¹ Fewer women in the workforce also reduces household incomes, which can have direct impacts on child nutrition. Recent analyses by UNFPA and UNICEF projected an increase in child marriages to cope with the decrease in household income.⁵²

Rural communities dependent on agriculture are also at risk of economic decline. Restrictions on movement have affected transportation of domestic agricultural products from fields to the major local markets while disrupting the export of certain agricultural products, such as watermelons, to China and Thailand. In addition, some overseas investors returned to their countries of origin at the beginning of the pandemic. Many who left their acquired agricultural holdings could not return to Lao PDR due to border closures, which led to the closure of their agriculture operations, putting many people in rural communities out of work.

Will Migrant Workers Return?

Many migrant workers who returned to Lao PDR during COVID-19 pandemic hope to re-migrate, some have no plans to leave.

An OXFAM study found that almost half of returned migrant workers surveyed preferred to re-migrate, mainly to Thailand; some stakeholders in the labor sector estimate the number is as high as 90 percent. A study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) found that more than 50 percent of surveyed returned migrants indicated they have no plans to leave Lao PDR for work again or are unsure of their plans.

Whether or not migrants prefer to return, jobs may not be available. Stakeholders interviewed noted high job competition in Thailand due to economic contraction and a projected increase of migrants from Cambodia and Myanmar. A tight job market may also increase migrant's vulnerability to trafficking, commercial sex work, or other potentially harmful working conditions.

If returning is not viable, workers may need training to integrate into the Lao economy. The IOM study found 36 percent of returning migrant workers were interested in upgrading their skills through vocational training in areas such as vehicle repair, tailoring, and cooking.

Sources: OXFAM. (2020). COVID-19 Impact Assessment: Socio-economic impacts on returnee migrant workers in Lao PDR. Vientiane. OXFAM. and IOM. (2020). Lao PDR Returning Migrants Survey. Vientiane. IOM.

BUSINESS OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

When interviewed, the LNCCI estimated that business in Lao PDR will need 1.5 years to recover from the first lockdown (2020) and an additional 2 years for the second (2021). The projection of recovery time is based on the effects of lockdowns and restrictions that required many businesses to reduce or close their operations. Some businesses such as agriculture, manufacturing, and construction have been affected by global and regional supply chain disruptions resulting in delayed equipment and technology imports. Cautious investors and weakened supply chains are expected to slow down the growth of the wholesale and retail sectors with consumers increasingly prioritizing essential items and delaying non-essential purchases.

Increased business closures and bankruptcies are expected amongst all businesses in the medium-term, especially micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The business environment faces substantial challenges in terms of identifying new domestic business opportunities, financing sources for household-led micro and small businesses, and strong logistics and local governance. Such challenges are likely to lead to a decreased appetite for entrepreneurship. This can further adversely

⁵¹ UNICEF Lao PDR. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Safeguarding Women's Health and Entrepreneurship. Vientiane.

⁵² Sriprasert P., Nguyen A. (2020). CARE Rapid Gender Analysis COVID-19 Lao People's Democratic Republic. Vientiane. CARE Lao PDR.; MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19: Reimagining Gender. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

affect Lao PDR as the benefits of import substitution will not be accrued. This might result in cheap, low-quality imports that are harmful to health, safety, and the environment. It could also lead to reduced employment opportunities.

Tourism will need to rebuild after coming to a standstill during COVID-19 travel restrictions. Short-sighted approaches to redevelopment could lead to erosion of the unique cultural and natural tourism product offerings in Lao PDR, reducing its appeal as a tourism destination. Unique Lao cultural heritage attributes such as handicrafts, traditions, and ways of life might be lost if the tourism sector is not able to gradually open in the medium-term. If tourism is opened without adequate planning and regulation of tourist infrastructure and carrying capacity of destinations, there will be adverse effects on the nature and environment of Lao PDR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Support domestic logistics and permit approvals to address disruptions to supply chains.** This can include coaching, incubating, and facilitating start-ups to address small scale logistical issues including the movement of agriculture produce from rural farmers to markets. Mechanisms to facilitate permits, tracking of truck drivers and COVID-19 passports for low risk and or vaccinated truck drivers will enable movement of goods between districts and provinces. Digitalization can play a role in improving the information flow and the approval process for permits.
- **Support Lao businesses to take advantage of regional economic integration initiatives.** Priorities should include identification of new regional value chains and the adoption of ASEAN harmonized standards in areas such as food security and organic agriculture. Systems such as the ASEAN Customs and Transit System (ACTS), which has gone live in six ASEAN countries, provide a platform to move goods from Lao PDR to the region while addressing logistical and customs procedures efficiently. The operationalization of the ACTS in Lao PDR and ASEAN Single Window should be explored (including customs and transport), logistics companies, exporters, and importers. Lao PDR is one of the 15 countries to have signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership free trade agreement. For Lao businesses to take advantage of this, the business environment requires regulatory reforms. This could provide a promising source of foreign investment and job creation, and increase GOL revenue.
- **Invest in business diversification.** Business diversification activities should include support for incubation, establishing a business, and business continuity support. Such support aligns with outcomes one and three of the 9th NSEDP.
- **Develop new value chains in key segments of the economy: begin with business diversification studies and follow with short vocational training programs.** Build on USAID's comparative advantage and regional experience using lead companies to strengthen market-linkages for SMEs, supporting business associations, advancing digitalization, and strengthening supply chains. New domestic value chains in agriculture could cover areas such as agriculture inputs; production technology including simple mechanization; and, post-harvest treatment including packaging and cold storage. Other areas of interest could include logistics, ICT services, tourism, environmental services, renewable energy, and social enterprises. Business diversification studies can inform short vocational training programs focusing on business start-ups, incubation, business skills, access to micro-finance options. New business value chains resulting from the Lao-China railway (Boten-Vientiane) can also be studied including the implications of the expected substantial cost savings in transporting goods to Kunming in China and eventually to Port of Laem Chabang in Thailand.⁵³

⁵³ World Bank. (2020). From Landlocked to Land-Linked: Unlocking the Potential of Lao-China Rail Connectivity, World Bank, Washington, USA

- **Build MSME capacity in digitalization.** USAID can leverage existing regional platforms such as the ASEAN SME Academy, which was established by USAID/ASEAN and provides many online programs supported by major United States technology providers.
- **Support the development of an inclusive domestic e-commerce and ICT services industry.** Consider integrating specific business inclusion measures for vulnerable groups such as youth, women, migrant workers, people with disabilities, remote rural communities, and ethnic groups. Partnerships between the United States and Lao PDR private sector would increase effectiveness, showcase USAID's competitive advantages, and support strategic interests. Interventions supporting national and local logistics would be highly relevant to ensure the movement of goods domestically and for export.
- **Support employment needs of youth.** USAID support can include mentoring and support for incubators leading to entrepreneurship, promoting innovation for local problems, enhancing digital skills and cultural and youth leadership programs.
- **Support integration of returned migrant workers into the economy, particularly women.** Some migrant workers who have returned from Thailand have skills and experience to use in Lao PDR; they need training on establishing a business and applying technology for quality control, and help connecting to the market. Workers wishing to start small businesses might need support navigating financial resources or tools such as digitalization. There is also a need to support and encourage women to work in male-dominated sectors such as energy, construction, manufacturing, logistics, etc. It is crucial to support female migrant workers in particular, to improve and diversify their skills, increasing their competitiveness within the Lao labor market or abroad.
- **Compliment GOL policy response and support public-private dialogue in the economic growth sector.** USAID can seek additional information to understand the GOL policy response to COVID-19 in the economic growth sector and adapt USAID programming to compliment the country's goals. Likewise, USAID can support increased public-private dialogue on the evolving impacts and policy response to COVID-19.

EDUCATION SECTOR

KEY FINDINGS



- When schools closed during COVID-19 lockdowns, only 16.5 percent of children in Lao PDR were able to access online learning sessions. Groups least able to access distance learning were children in rural areas and children of non-Lao-Tai speaking households.
- The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the limited capacities in online, blended, and distance learning among teachers and schools in Lao PDR. There is urgent need to strengthen capacity, including the expansion of digital infrastructure and training for teachers.
- Student dropout rates are expected to increase, particularly at secondary education level, due to school closures and household income pressures; girls, students from rural and ethnic minority communities, and students with disabilities are most at risk.

EFFECT OF COVID-19

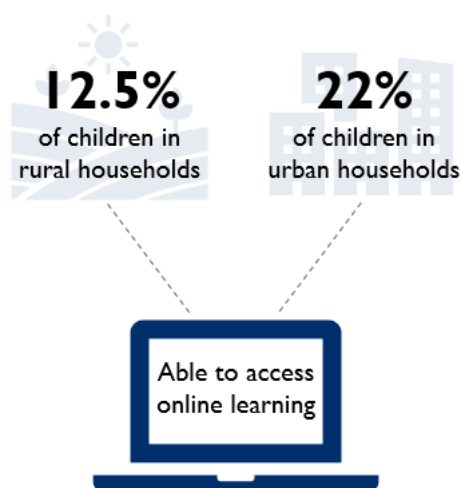
SCHOOL CLOSURES

During school closures, the education system switched from physical classes to blended or full distance education approaches. Due to limited digital infrastructure, only 16.5 percent of children in Lao PDR were able to access online learning sessions during lockdown periods with the remaining children using distance learning or having no educational opportunities (see Online and Distance Learning section below).⁵⁴ When schools reopened the school calendar was extended to cover teaching time. However, according to studies, 65 percent of children felt they learned less since the pandemic began, and 51 percent believed their education will be delayed.⁵⁵ Studies estimate that COVID-19 disruptions to education quality and learning outcomes affected almost 1.7 million children, though limited evidence was provided to support these findings.⁵⁶ When schools closed, families were unable initially to access school nutrition programs, which cover 137,567 pre-primary and primary school students across 1,439 WFP-supported schools (including two special needs schools).

Figure 4: Children's Ability to Access Online Learning

ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING

According to a UN study, 22 percent of urban households with children were able to access online learning in comparison to 12.5 percent of rural households with children.⁵⁷ Many schools in urban areas and big municipalities continued their teaching-learning activities by quickly applying distance learning. Schools and students in rural areas had limited access to virtual teaching-learning facilities such as mobile phones, computers, internet connections, and TV, as well as other challenges to creating effective home-schooling environments. According to a study conducted by UNICEF, 78 percent of surveyed parents felt unable to support children's behavior and needs when schools closed.⁵⁸



Girls and children from non-Lao-Tai speaking households were particularly challenged in accessing online and distance learning. According to a study by UNICEF, COVID-19 has disrupted education more among girls than boys due to their increased household responsibilities.⁵⁹ Children from non-Lao-Tai speaking households faced multiple barriers to accessing education, including less access to digital infrastructure for online learning and challenges successfully navigating home learning kits and online materials that were only available in Lao-Tai.⁶⁰ While there is reason to believe children with disabilities also faced increased barriers to education during the pandemic, there are significant gaps in data on people with disabilities in Lao PDR to confirm this.

⁵⁴ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁵⁵ UN Lao PDR. (2020). Socio-Economic Response Framework to COVID-19. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁵⁶ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁵⁷ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁵⁸ MPI. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 on Children, Adolescents and Their Families in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF.

⁵⁹ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

⁶⁰ MPI. (2021). COVID-19 Risks and Vulnerabilities in Lao PDR. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR

TEACHING CAPACITY

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in reduced teaching capacities, both in terms of number of teachers available and the ability of teachers to effectively teach online or using blended and distance learning approaches. The number of volunteer teachers declined, with the largest drops in primary education; primary volunteer teachers dropped by 14.6 percent while secondary education volunteer teachers dropped by 9.8 percent (in comparison to 2019 figures). Many volunteer teachers resigned due to difficult household financial situations and reduced government funding to increase public service teacher quotas, disrupting the pipeline of new teachers, and threatening the availability of teachers in the medium-term.⁶¹ The COVID-19 crisis also exposed the limited capacities in online and distance learning amongst teachers in Lao PDR. Despite the GOL and development partners' response to COVID-19 with blended learning approaches, gaps in training and capacity to support children with distance learning exist amongst principals, teachers, and parents.

ENROLLMENT

Student enrollment varied greatly across Lao PDR's 148 districts and among different categories of students since the advent of COVID-19. According to a GOL study based on the annual school census report for the school year 2020-21, kindergarten student enrollments were nine percent lower than expected. Pre-primary student enrollments were close to forecasted levels. While ten districts reported a sizable increase in enrollment, 17 districts reported a decline of greater than 20 percent and four districts in Xaysomboun province reported a decline of greater than 27 percent. Primary education student enrollments increased by about two percent with no major variations across districts. Overall, student enrollment in secondary education was slightly lower than the forecast, while it dropped more than ten percent in 36 districts.⁶² These patterns merit further study to determine the reasons for such large variations by district.

SHORT-AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES

ATTENDANCE AND OUTCOMES

Education disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Lockdowns to stop the spread of COVID-19 are expected to disrupt education for most children and reduce learning outcomes for children from the most vulnerable households including rural and remote, ethnic groups, poor households, and children with disabilities. If the infrastructure and capacity is not improved to implement distance learning options, children in rural areas and children with disabilities are likely to have an education gap in terms of quality and learning outcomes. School closures also increase the risk of gaps in household nutrition due to difficulties in accessing school nutrition programs.

Students are at increased risk of dropping out of school, particularly girls, students from remote rural and ethnic minority communities, and students with disabilities. School dropout rates are expected to

Blended Learning

The GOL introduced a blended approach combining distance learning content and home learning kits during the first lockdown period. Distance learning content was distributed via a multitude of channels including TV, radio, YouTube, WhatsApp, Skype, and Facebook. These included 15 TV and 30 radio spots broadcast in Lao and local languages as part of the Lao Education and Sports Program operated by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) Institute of Education and Science Information Centre. UNICEF relaunched an animated series 'My Village' and 'My House', which reached an estimated 72 percent of the school children population. Learning materials to support home-learning was developed by several development partners and shared via UNICEF's online platforms.

Sources: SIKHAO, S. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on education in Lao PDR*. Vientiane. MOES.

MPI. (2021). *Impact of COVID-19 on Children, Adolescents and Their Families in Lao PDR*. Vientiane. UNICEF Lao PDR.

⁶¹ SIKHAO, S. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on education in Lao PDR*. Vientiane. MOES.

⁶² SIKHAO, S. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on education in Lao PDR*. Vientiane. MOES.

increase particularly at secondary education level due to school closures and household income pressures. Girls are more vulnerable to dropping out of school than boys due to their increase in household responsibilities during the pandemic. Lack of adequate multilingual (including braille) educational content and scaling up of online infrastructure in difficult to reach areas is likely to lead to further school dropouts and increased long-term disadvantage for children from the most vulnerable households.

FUNDING

According to stakeholders, in the medium-term GOL funds for education are expected to remain constant or decline due to the fiscal situation of the country. Such budget cuts could potentially diminish learning outcomes and eventually reduce the reach of education services; children in rural and remote areas might have to travel further to access schools with teachers. Additionally, school children in approximately 500 schools where GOL is currently supporting school meal programs are at risk in the event of budget cuts.⁶³

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen capacity to implement blended and distance learning.** There is an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of pedagogic advisors, principals, teachers, and the wider community including village leaders and parents to successfully implement blended and distance learning approaches. This must be accompanied by scaling up the development of take-home learning packages and development of online materials, online libraries, and availability of multilingual and braille content. Building on the regional lessons learned, partnerships with the private sector can be explored to develop materials. USAID activities can also increase the availability of take-home learning material and build upon the UNICEF distance learning platform and support its extension in provinces where USAID implements.
- **Provide support to parents and caregivers during lockdown periods.** Building on lessons learned from UNICEF, USAID activities can also explore the development of parental support packages and household support activities (e.g. Learn to Read and Okard) to build resilience to the current disruptions being experienced from domestic lockdown. Cash and in-kind support to parents and caregivers could be provided to help them administer home-based learning tools and solutions. For example, USAID could continue and expand its joint intervention with the United States Department of Agriculture to support take-home rations, implemented by CRS and WFP through the school nutrition program to address falling nutrition levels. The program could be extended to vulnerable populations including poor households (bottom 40 percent), ethnic minority communities, households with disabilities, and households with migrant workers that have lost their jobs.
- **Support the development of distance learning with expansion of infrastructure and devices to improve accessibility** in partnership with GOL, private sector, and development partners. Private sector engagement in education should include Lao businesses operating in ICT and education and existing or potential entrepreneurs at provincial and district levels. USAID could also seek opportunities to engage United States private sector

Regional Lesson: Coordinate to scale online learning

Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia were able to scale up distance and online learning through *partnerships involving government, schools, parents, community, and private sector*, such as ICT and education service providers. One key lesson from 2020 is that *online education content, teacher and school capacities, and infrastructure require a long-term, coordinated effort* to effectively bring to scale.

⁶³ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

entities through avenues like the United States-ASEAN Business Advisory Council to leverage tools, platforms, and technology, and provide economies of scale.

- **Include stakeholders from disadvantaged and vulnerable households in the development of education content and infrastructure**, including those from remote communities, ethnic minority communities, households of migrant workers, households with persons with disabilities, and poor households. This would ensure that the major issues and vulnerabilities faced by children from the most disadvantaged households can be addressed as part of a mainstreaming approach to the design of education programs.
- **Consider options to mitigate risk of children dropping out of school during periods of distance learning and school disruptions.** The WB's experience providing education stipends and Plan International's experience establishing seven mobile fund transfer services is worth building on. Adolescent girls who are vulnerable to dropping out, can be supported in their learning including the provision of community-based cross-learning opportunities that are conducive to distancing protocols.

ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT SECTORS

KEY FINDINGS



- Lao PDR has experienced greater domestic and international demand for electricity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Interest in renewable energy has continued to increase.
- The effects of COVID-19 have had limited environmental impact.
- The economic strain from COVID-19 only further incentivizes unsustainable practices to pursue quick economic growth.
- There is an opportunity to mainstream green growth where possible.

EFFECT OF COVID-19

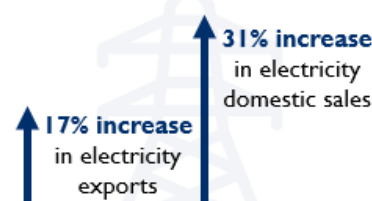
DEMAND FOR ENERGY

Despite initial declines in electricity export to the region due to lower rainfall and reduced industrial demand, both domestic demand and export demand increased during the second half of 2020 and an overall increase of 33 percent is expected by the end of the year (Figure 5).⁶⁴

There is interest in diversification of the energy mix in Lao PDR to increase non-hydro renewable energy sources. This is primarily to mitigate the effects of lower rainfall resulting from climate change. This has led the GOL to incorporate a different energy mix and supply diversification into Lao PDR's Integrated Resource and

Figure 5: Electricity Usage in Lao PDR as of September

ELECTRICITY USE AS OF SEPTEMBER 2020:



⁶⁴ World Bank. (2021). Lao PDR Economic Monitor: Supporting Economic Recovery. Vientiane. World Bank

Resilience Planning process. Such a diversification of the energy mix in Lao PDR can also increase resilience to COVID-19 effects due to operating costs and tariffs governing renewable energy.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Available research suggests limited environmental impacts due to COVID-19. One report suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in some positive effects on the environment in Lao PDR due to less slash-and-burn agriculture and reduced vehicle emissions, resulting in better air quality.⁶⁵

SHORT-AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES

CONTEXT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The income and fiscal pressure caused by the COVID-19 pandemic might lead to unsustainable development opportunities that provide quick economic gains but may have significant consequences on the environment. As agriculture expands to meet domestic food needs due to border closures, the use of low quality and unregulated inputs such as fertilizer and pesticide can lead to severe health and environmental effects. Investment in smart zones and green industrial zones has slowed and many recent investments focus on resource extraction. In the medium term, new industrial zones and economic corridors run the risk of increasing adverse impacts on the environment. Limited attention to support start-ups to grow in environmental and green technologies can lead to existing fledgling ventures being wiped out when large companies move in, accelerated by the new railway system and industrial zones. Human-wildlife conflicts are likely to increase if household income pressures force rural households to seek additional sources of food and resources from protected areas. Biodiversity pressures might also increase as a result.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Take the opportunity to mainstream green growth where possible across all USAID activities.** A regional and global trend is emerging that emphasizes environmental sustainability in the COVID-19 economic recovery.⁶⁶ Environment and green growth are also in-line with the priorities of the 9th NSEDP. USAID should incorporate innovation, digital transformation, sustainable economic development, economic and social resilience, and long-term goals like environmental sustainability and inclusion. Specifically, mainstreaming sustainability across activities can include a variety of approaches including training materials, business support services, local partnerships, resource efficiency measures, support for innovation, and promoting champions at village, district, and provincial level. Support for the incubation and start-up of businesses focusing on innovative environmental services, sustainable services, and social enterprises will encourage the sustainable growth of Lao companies and promote employment. Efforts to support the gathering of disaggregated data will be important to understand the unique needs of women and disadvantaged groups and to enable targeted interventions.
- **Support training and integration of returned migrant workers and unemployed workers back into the Lao economy, including sustainable enterprises.** Many of the migrant workers returning from Thailand and laid-off workers have skills and experiences that can be used to further the development of the economy in Lao PDR. There is an opportunity to empower these individuals to become entrepreneurs through the provision of vocational training and support for new businesses. Entrepreneurship programs could contribute to the preservation of natural resources in the community through the development of sustainable agriculture, provisions of environmental services or eco-tourism according to informants. This

⁶⁵ Southichack, M., Siliphong, P. Inthakesone, B. (2020). Socio-Economic Impact Assessment Of COVID-19 On Lao PDR. Vientiane. UN Lao PDR.

⁶⁶ ASEAN Secretariat. (2020). Mid-Term Review: ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint 2025. Jakarta. ASEAN.

would promote sustainable development and create more job opportunities for people living in rural communities.

- **Explore activities involving integrated and environmentally friendly planning at provincial and district levels.** Integrated planning at the provincial level can include households, disadvantaged groups, industrial zones, environmentally sensitive areas, water catchment areas, flood prone zones, agriculture lands, markets, and logistical resources and their inter-linkages. Activities supporting environmentally friendly planning at the local level would be important to attract investment in the green economy, move away from less sustainable resource extraction industries, and better integrate the requirements of vulnerable groups into provincial and district planning. The tourism carrying capacity of heritage sites such as Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang should be studied, and tourism support initiatives explored to mitigate any potential over-tourism in the future, once the travel restrictions have been lifted and the new railway opens. Initiatives can build on the geographic information system piloted with initial funding from SDC in two provinces through the Knowledge for Development (K4D)/Lao DECIDE project.⁶⁷ The project engaged four Ministries and the National Institute for Economic Research with technical support from the Centre for Development and Environment at the University of Berne.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic and related mitigation and prevention measures (border closures, travel restrictions, social distancing, lockdowns, etc.) have affected Lao society and the economy across sectors. Two key effects that have changed the context of multiple sectors are the loss of household income and the restrictions on movement.

- **Loss of household income** – Widespread loss of household income through unemployment or reduced earnings in MSME has and will continue to negatively impact a wide variety of development indicators such as nutrition and school attendance.
- **Restrictions on movement** – Travel restrictions and lockdowns have caused businesses and service providers around the world to seek new ways of operating, accelerating the need for ICT access and services. In Lao PDR, schools, health care providers, businesses and the GOL are all facing gaps in digital capacity, awareness on cybercrime, and digital literacy.

Assessment findings also highlighted that the effects of COVID-19 are not felt equally across the population. Across all sectors the COVID-19 pandemic has had the most adverse effects on vulnerable populations, including women, remote/rural populations, and children/youth. These groups are also predicted to continue to face the most adverse short- and medium-term consequences of the pandemic.

- **Women** – Gender norms and power dynamics shape the economic and social lives of men and women in Lao PDR, leading to different experiences of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Women's prevalence in hard-hit economic sectors, frontline healthcare, and micro and small enterprises make them particularly vulnerable to the economic effects of COVID-19. Women in Lao PDR are also more likely to be caretakers of children navigating distance learning, and are more vulnerable to GBV. Recovery programming in any sector must give specific attention to understanding the specific needs of both men and women.
- **Rural populations** – As all sectors are pushed to rely more on ICT, the digital divide between urban and rural populations becomes increasingly important to address. This has manifested in challenges accessing education during the pandemic and is predicted to continue

⁶⁷ Centre for Development and Environment (CDE). (2020). *The Lao DECIDE info Project*. [online] Available at: https://www.cde.unibe.ch/research/projects/the_lao_decide_info_project/index_eng.html [Accessed 5 Aug. 2021].

to affect education outcomes as well as economic opportunities and access to healthcare in the medium-term.

- **Children/youth** – While COVID-19 health impacts may pose fewer risks to children and youth than adults, the socio-economic implications are significant, particularly for children of ethnic groups, children with disabilities, and children from the poor households. Nutritional deficiencies, school dropout, and unemployment among youth are key consequences of COVID-19 to monitor and mitigate over the short- and medium-term.

The above implications of COVID-19 warrant prioritizing carefully designed and coordinated interventions, with an emphasis on data quality and digitalization.

- **Pursue cross-sectoral strategies** – USAID could tackle some of the above-mentioned cross-sectoral challenges across its active sectors in order to increase the coherence and efficiency of its programming. For example, introducing e-learning support or digital literacy initiatives across sectors may best address COVID-19-related challenges faced by beneficiaries.
- **Coordinate closely with other development partners and the GOL** – USAID should continue to provide support to the GOL in response to COVID-19 that aligns with the 9th NSEDP. USAID and other partners should identify the most critical issues for coordination and adopt efficient mechanisms for coordination.
- **Address the lack of data, particularly focused on vulnerable groups** – Most sectors in Lao PDR, including health, governance, environment, and economic growth, lack good quality data related to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data is particularly lacking on issues and needs of women and vulnerable groups.
- **Mainstream digitalization across activities** – All sectors could benefit from including some form of ICT support, with an emphasis on promoting access given overall low internet access in the country and equipping service providers with technological solutions to better reach the underserved. Building off USAID's Digital Strategy and work in the region, USAID has an opportunity to leverage its resources to advance this key issue.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ USAID (n.d.). *USAID Digital Strategy*. [online] USAID.gov. Available at: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19_and_Digital_Development.pdf [Accessed 11 Jun. 2021].

ANNEX I: METHODOLOGY

Based on the SOW and posed RQs, the assessment used a qualitative approach that included a full review of relevant secondary data and primary data collection, including KIIs and FGDs with key stakeholders.

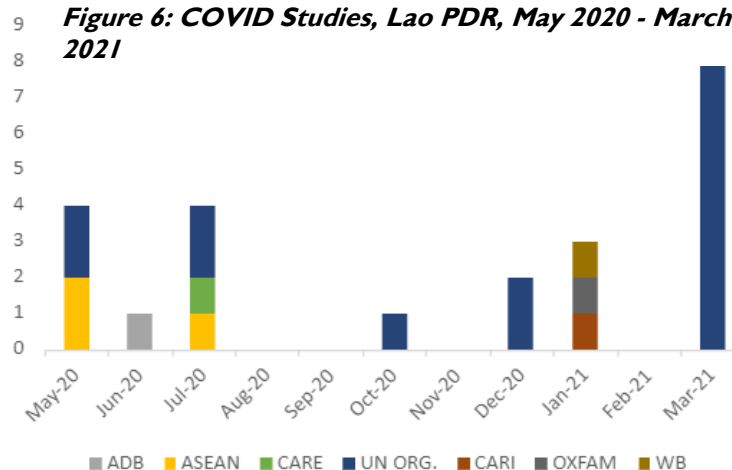
METHODS

SECONDARY DATA

The AT reviewed over 80 documents to address the effects of COVID-19 on key sectors (RQ1-2), assess the response of government and development partners in Lao PDR and the region (RQ3-4), and understand national and regional trends to inform findings on potential future effects (RQ 5-6). Documents reviewed included quarterly/annual reports and covid-related studies from USAID activities included in the sample, studies on the effect of COVID-19 in Lao PDR developed by GOL, NPAs, development partners, and donors, action plans developed by GOL agencies, and regional studies by USAID, development partners, and research organizations on the effects of COVID-19. A full bibliography of sources included in the desk review is available in Annex 3: Bibliography.

Due to the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be noted that much of the desk review for this assessment was conducted between February and April 2021, prior to the onset of the second wave in Lao PDR (See Figure 6). The AT incorporated several new sources in May 2021, however, due to the delayed availability of new data reflecting the effects of the second wave, most findings presented in this report anticipate possible subsequent waves but does not include updated information on the effects of the second wave.

Figure 6: COVID Studies, Lao PDR, May 2020 - March 2021



PRIMARY DATA

The AT collected qualitative data through a remote KIIs and FGDs. Due to COVID-19 precautions, all data collection was conducted remotely over internet-based calling services. Data collection took place in two stages: Stage one included KIIs with USAID/Lao PDR staff and FGDs with small groups of IP staff for the USAID activities included in the assessment sample; Stage 2 included NPAs, other development partners/donors active in Lao PDR, as well as regional organizations and other United States Government (USG) agencies in Lao PDR and the region. A total of 35 stakeholders were included in the assessment through 23 KIIs and 14 FGDs (Table 1). A full stakeholder list is available in Annex 2: Stakeholders Interviewed.

The sample for this assessment was purposively selected by the AT through consultation with USAID's Program Office. Following a review of 41 ongoing USAID activities in Lao PDR, a list of 10 priority USAID activities to be assessed was selected based on rationale such as budget size, importance of the sector to USAID, and relevance to women and disadvantaged groups. Sampling for Stage 2 was informed by Stage 1 interviews as a means of snowball sampling and prioritizing the most relevant stakeholders from Stage 2 stakeholder categories. Each KII took approximately one hour and FGDs two hours. The data collection protocol used by the AT are available in Annex 4: Data Collection Protocols.

Table 1: Completed KIIs and FGDs

Stakeholder Category	No. of KIIs	No. of FGDs	No. of people interviewed
USAID/Lao PDR staff	6	0	14
IPs of priority USAID/Lao PDR activities	0	10	34
Development partners	11	0	17
NPAs	2	4	13
Regional / Other USG	4	0	7
Total	23	14	85

DATA ANALYSIS

To ensure rigor and triangulation of findings, the AT followed a structured approach to data analysis involving two stages: the first stage focusing on the analysis of each individual data set and the second stage focusing on the triangulation of findings between data sets. First, data were periodically reviewed during data collection and organized by assessment question to facilitate the preliminary identification of themes as well as gaps, which necessitated additional attention in the remaining data collection phase. Next, the AT focused on triangulating findings from the different data sources, paying attention to the reliability and timing of the data to ensure that the findings to the RQs were evidence-based and well-supported. The data sources triangulated included different types of KII stakeholders, data from FGDs and secondary data from documentation review. The process of analysis was undertaken by RQ.

LIMITATIONS

The AT faced and addressed the following limitations:

1. *Recall Bias*: Some questions raised during the interviews dealt with issues that took place over the past 12 months which some people interviewed may have found difficult to remember. This was mitigated through careful facilitation of interviews, starting with information about the stakeholder's responsibilities and gathering information on the main effects of COVID-19 on their work and eventually the wider sector.
2. *Limitations to data from desk review*: The AT gathered secondary data through a desk review which covered over 81 documents from development partners, GOL, NPAs, INGOs, and regional studies. Many of the studies from Lao PDR were based on small sample sizes, between a few 100 to 1500 informants. Such small sample sizes made the generalization of findings difficult. Some studies by major development partners highlighted figures on the effects of COVID-19 without providing evidence. The AT attempted to mitigate such limitations by focusing on studies that had larger sample sizes, referred to evidence, and made less reference to anecdotal accounts.
3. *Challenges in organizing interviews*: The availability of stakeholders contacted for this assessment was affected by several external situations such as the Lao New Year holidays, the COVID-19 vaccination programs which involved many development partners, and a second wave of COVID-19 transmission in Lao PDR. Several interviews that were confirmed, were postponed for such reasons. The AT mitigated these challenges together with USAID, by being as flexible as possible in terms of timing for the scheduling of interviews and having a two-month window for data collection.
4. *Limitations to interviews*: due to social distancing requirements and eventually a second wave in Lao PDR, all interviews carried out were done by online means. This was challenging, as initial courtesies and exchanges, which usually precede an in-person interview serve to put

those being interviewed at ease and build their trust could not be undertaken. The AT mitigated these challenges by establishing a clear protocol with introductions, clarifications on the objectives of the interview, the voluntary nature of responses provided, and those answers would not be attributed to any specific individual. During the introductions, the AT was also able to build a rapport with those being interviewed. Interviews with NPAs were conducted in the Lao language, to put stakeholders at ease when asking questions and obtaining replies.

5. *Broad scope:* the assignment was designed as a rapid assessment with a team of two researchers supported by staff from SI HQ. However, the coverage of the assessment spanned multiple sectors, over 10 priority USAID activities, 85 stakeholders, and a large number of documents and required examining data with the lens of numerous sectors, timeframes and populations. The AT and SI HQ staff mitigated these challenges to the extent possible by developing an analytical matrix that enabled systematic analysis of the data gathered and regular brainstorming to arrive at synthesis and conclusions.

ANNEX 2: STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED

	STAKEHOLDER CATEGORY	ORGANIZATION	NO. OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED	TYPE OF INTERVIEW
1.	IPs	Counter Trafficking In Persons/Winrock International	4	FGD
2.	IPs	Asia Foundation	1	FGD
3	IPs	RTI Intl.	4	FGD
4.	IPs	NUMARK	2	FGD
5.	IPs	IBI	4	FGD
6.	IPs	CRS	4	FGD
7.	IPs	Okard/World Education Institute	2	FGD
8.	IPs	HI/Learn to Read/ Save the Children Institute	5	FGD
9.	IPs	ACDI/VOCA	5	FGD
10.	IPs	UNICEF	3	FGD
11.	DPs	WFP	1	KII
12.	DPs	Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	2	KII
13.	DPs	FAO	1	KII
14.	DPs	WHO	1	KII
15.	DPs	UNDP	2	KII
16.	DPs	JICA	5	KII
17.	DPs	ILO	1	KII
18.	DPs	UNICEF	1	KII
19.	DPs	Asia Foundation	1	KII
20.	DPs	UNDP	1	KII
21.	DPs	PLAN Lao PDR	1	KII
22.	NPAs	ADWLE/GDA/SV	3	FGD
23	NPAs	LICA	1	KII
24	NPAs	Lao SME, Lao Business Women's Association	2	KII
25.	NPAs	LNCCI	2	KII
26.	NPAs	AFA, LDPA, PFHA	3	FGD

	STAKEHOLDER CATEGORY	ORGANIZATION	NO. OF PEOPLE INTERVIEWED	TYPE OF INTERVIEW
27.	NPAs	Green Discovery/Muang Lao Food	2	KII
28.	USAID		2	KII
29.	USAID		2	KII
30.	USAID		3	KII
31.	USAID		2	KII
31.	USAID		2	KII
32.	USAID		3	KII
33.	Regional Orgz.	US Embassy	3	KII
34.	Regional Orgz.	Regional Development Mission for Asia (USAID/RDMA)	2	KII
35.	Regional Orgz.	US Embassy/CDC	1	KII
36.	Regional Orgz.	Agricultural Attaché, Office of Agricultural Affairs	1	KII

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ANNEX 4: DATA COLLECTION PROTOCOLS

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW TOOL

INTRODUCTION (TO BE USED FOR ALL KIIS INCLUDING USAID, GOL, NPAS, DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS, REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS)

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. I am _____ and this is my colleague _____. We are an external independent team hired by the USAID/Lao PDR Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Support activity. We are not affiliated directly with USAID nor with the implementing partners. This interview is part of the USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment.

This interview will take about one hour, and your participation is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. I will be conducting the interview while my colleague takes down notes. During the interview we will ask questions about:

1. The current impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Potential short-term and medium-term consequences of COVID-19
3. Your recommendations for how USAID can respond in the future

Our interview will focus on some specific questions where we would like your professional views. There are no wrong or right answers as the input provided is unique and this effort is part of a learning process. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to and please ask for clarification if there is any question that you do not understand. You can also choose to end the interview at any time you wish to, without any consequences to you or anyone else involved in the project. If you start the interview and wish to stop at any time for any reason, or if you don't want to answer any questions, you may do so without penalty. No action is required to withdraw from or refuse to participate in the study, other than to inform the interviewer of your decision.

Only the research team will know your identity and we will not share any identifiable information with USAID or anyone else. Your answers will be combined with others' responses and reported in the aggregate in the final report with general identifiers like respondent group and sex. Any information you provide that might identify you, will be kept confidential to the fullest extent under local law and U.S. Government policy.

We would like to have your permission to record the interview for reference purpose. If during the interview, you wish to share something confidential/off-the-record please let us know and we will stop the recording.

Do you have any questions about this interview?

Are you willing to participate in this interview? Yes _____ No _____

Consent for the interview to be recorded? Yes _____ No _____

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE - USAID

Reference:

Sector:

Type of Organization: USAID

Organization: USAID/Lao PDR

Position:

Name:

Gender:

Date of Interview:

If questions are not applicable, mark accordingly

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION [APPROXIMATELY 40 MINS]

1. THESE QUESTIONS DEAL WITH THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON USAID ACTIVITIES

- 1.1 How has COVID-19 affected USAID programming operationally (e.g. internal planning processes, etc)
- 1.2 How has COVID-19 affected USAID programming strategically (e.g. changing priorities, urgent requests etc)?
- 1.3 How have USAID responded to these effects and challenges?

2. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN YOUR SECTOR AND ON PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED² GROUPS

- 2.1 In your experience, how has COVID-19 uniquely affected women in Lao PDR? *(Probe for challenges and changing needs)*
- 2.2 In your experience, how has COVID-19 uniquely affected people from disadvantaged groups? *(Probe for challenges and changing needs)*

3. LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM THE RESPONSE OF IPS TO COVID-19

- 3.1 From your perspective, what plans, tasks or approaches taken by your activity have worked well in the response to COVID-19 and why?
- 3.2 What has not worked so well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 [~7 MINUTES]

4. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON USAID ACTIVITIES

- 5.1 What do you feel are the potential short-term³ consequences of Covid-19 on USAID activities?
- 5.2 What are the potential medium-term⁴ consequences of Covid-19 on USAID activities(e.g. issues, needs)?

RECOMMENDATIONS [~13 MINUTES]

5. RESPONSE OF USAID ACTIVITIES TO THE SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

- 5.1 As we suggest recommendations for the future, we're interested to know what kinds of changes you may already be considering to USAID programming, in the next year, as a result of Covid-19? Have you considered any new interventions or approaches?
- 5.2 How about in the longer-term? What changes, new interventions or new approaches have you considered, if any, as a result of Covid-19?

6. EMPOWERING WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

6.1 Have you considered ways to empower and engage Women to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID-19?

6.2 What about disadvantaged groups?

7. Lastly, thinking of all that we covered in this interview, what would you most like to learn from this assessment?

8. Who are the key government agencies you feel we should engage to learn more about requirements for new sectors of involvement?

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW TOOL

INTRODUCTION (TO BE USED FOR ALL KIIS INCLUDING USAID, GOL, NPAS, DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS, REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS)

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. I am _____ and this is my colleague _____. We are an external independent team hired by the USAID/Lao PDR Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Support activity. We are not affiliated directly with USAID nor with the implementing partners. This interview is part of the USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment.

This interview will take about one hour, and your participation is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. I will be conducting the interview while my colleague takes down notes. During the interview we will ask questions about:

1. The current impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Potential short-term and medium-term consequences of COVID-19
3. Your recommendations for how USAID can respond in the future

Our interview will focus on some specific questions where we would like your professional views. There are no wrong or right answers as the input provided is unique and this effort is part of a learning process. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to and please ask for clarification if there is any question that you do not understand. You can also choose to end the interview at any time you wish to, without any consequences to you or anyone else involved in the project. If you start the interview and wish to stop at any time for any reason, or if you don't want to answer any questions, you may do so without penalty. No action is required to withdraw from or refuse to participate in the study, other than to inform the interviewer of your decision.

Only the research team will know your identity and we will not share any identifiable information with USAID or anyone else. Your answers will be combined with others' responses and reported in the aggregate in the final report with general identifiers like respondent group and sex. Any information you provide that might identify you, will be kept confidential to the fullest extent under local law and U.S. Government policy.

We would like to have your permission to record the interview for reference purpose. If during the interview, you wish to share something confidential/off-the-record please let us know and we will stop the recording.

Do you have any questions about this interview?

Are you willing to participate in this interview? Yes _____ No _____

Consent for the interview to be recorded? Yes _____ No _____

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE – NPAS (ACTIVE SECTORS)

META DATA

Reference:

Sector:

Type of Organization: NPA

Organization:

Position:

Name:

Gender:

Date of Interview:

If questions are not applicable, mark accordingly

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

5. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON USAID ACTIVITIES

5.1 What are the potential short-term²⁶ consequences of Covid-19 on your activity (e.g. issues, needs)?

5.2 What are the potential medium-term²⁷ consequences of Covid-19 on your activity (e.g. issues, needs)?

6. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

N/A

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION

1. THESE QUESTIONS DEAL WITH THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON YOUR SECTOR

1.1 Thinking about the difference before COVID-19 and now, how has your work in the X sector been affected?

1.2 Which areas have seen the greatest impact?

2. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN YOUR SECTOR AND ON PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED⁸ GROUPS

2.1 Has COVID-19 particularly affected any vulnerable populations? For example, for women?

2.2 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected people from disadvantaged groups including challenges faced and changing need?

3. RESPONSE BY STAKEHOLDERS TO COVID-19

3.1 How has your organization responded to the effect of COVID-19 in your sector?

4. LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4.1 What approaches have worked well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

4.2 What has not worked so well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

5. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON YOUR SECTOR

- 5.1 What are the potential short-term⁹ consequences of Covid-19 on your sector (e.g. issues, needs)? How about for women in particular? And disadvantaged groups?
- 5.2 What are the potential medium-term¹⁰ consequences of Covid-19 on your sector (e.g. issues, needs)? How about for women in particular? And disadvantaged groups?

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. RESPONSE OF USAID ACTIVITIES TO THE SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

- 6.1 What are the priority issues and needs in the short-term?
- 6.2 What are the priority issues and needs in the medium-term?

7. NEW USAID INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS THE LONGER-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19

- 7.1 What are the priority issues and needs in the long-term?
- 7.2 What new approaches for assistance could USAID consider to address the long-term impacts of COVID-19 in your sector?

8. EMPOWERING WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

- 8.1 What are the potential short-term and medium-term consequences of Covid-19 on women in your sector (e.g. issues, needs)?
- 8.2 What are the potential short-term and medium-term consequences of Covid-19 on disadvantaged groups in your sector (e.g. issues, needs)?
- 8.3 In what ways can future interventions empower and engage women and disadvantaged groups to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID-19?

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW TOOL

INTRODUCTION (TO BE USED FOR ALL KIIS INCLUDING USAID, GOL, NPAS, DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS, REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS)

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for agreeing to speak with us today. I am _____ and this is my colleague _____. We are an external independent team hired by the USAID/Lao PDR Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Support activity. We are not affiliated directly with USAID nor with the implementing partners. This interview is part of the USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment.

This interview will take about one hour, and your participation is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. I will be conducting the interview while my colleague takes down notes. During the interview we will ask questions about:

1. The current impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Potential short-term and medium-term consequences of COVID-19
3. Your recommendations for how USAID can respond in the future

Our interview will focus on some specific questions where we would like your professional views. There are no wrong or right answers as the input provided is unique and this effort is part of a learning process. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to and please ask for clarification if there is any question that you do not understand. You can also choose to end the interview at any time you wish to, without any consequences to you or anyone else involved in the project. If you start the interview and wish to stop at any time for any reason, or if you don't want to answer any questions, you may do so without penalty. No action is required to withdraw from or refuse to participate in the study, other than to inform the interviewer of your decision.

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We would like to have your permission to record the interview for reference purpose. If during the interview, you wish to share something confidential/off-the-record please let us know and we will stop the recording.

Do you have any questions about this interview?

Are you willing to participate in this interview? Yes _____ No _____

Consent for the interview to be recorded? Yes _____ No _____

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE – DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

META DATA

Reference:

Sector¹⁷:

Type of Organization:

Organization:

Position:

Name:

Gender:

Date of Interview:

If questions are not applicable, mark accordingly

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION

1. THESE QUESTIONS DEAL WITH THE EFFECT OF COVID-19

1.1 Can you please provide us with a broad overview of the areas covered in your portfolio?

1.2 How has COVID-19 affected your work strategically (e.g. coordination, implementation, means of engaging with stakeholders and beneficiaries, etc) over the last 12 months?

1.3 How has the current wave of COVID-19 affected your work?

2. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND ON PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED¹⁸ GROUPS

2.1 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected women including challenges faced and changing needs?

2.2 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected people from disadvantaged groups including challenges faced and changing need?

3. RESPONSE BY STAKEHOLDERS TO COVID-19

3.1 How has your organization and partners responded so far to the challenges faced?

4. LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4.1 What approaches have worked well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

4.2 What has not worked so well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

5. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

5.1 What are potential short-term¹⁹ consequences of COVID-19 (e.g. issues, needs in specific sectors) is your agency expecting? How about for women in particular? And disadvantaged groups?

5.2 How are you factoring in Covid19 in your future work plans?

RECOMMENDATIONS

6. NOT RELEVANT

7. NEW INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS THE LONGER-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19

7.1 What approaches for assistance should be considered to-address the long-term impacts of COVID-19?

7.2 What new activities should be considered to-address the long-term impacts of COVID-19 in terms of gaps?

8. EMPOWERING WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

8.1 In what ways can development activities empower and engage women to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID-19?

8.2 In what ways can development activities empower and engage disadvantaged groups to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID-19?

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE – REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

META DATA

Reference:

Sector²¹:

Type of Organization:

Organization:

Position:

Name:

Gender:

Date of Interview:

If questions are not applicable, mark accordingly

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION

1. NOT RELEVANT

2. NOT RELEVANT

3. NOT RELEVANT

4. LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4.1 What approaches have worked well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

4.2 What has not worked so well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

5. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

5.1 What are the potential short-term²² consequences of Covid-19 (e.g. issues, needs in specific sectors) in the region? What about on women and disadvantaged groups?

5.2 What are the potential medium-term²³ consequences of Covid-19 (e.g. issues, needs in specific sectors) in the region? What about on women and disadvantaged groups?

6. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

RECOMMENDATIONS

7. NOT RELEVANT

8. NEW INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS THE LONGER-TERM IMPACTS OF COVID-19

8.1 What approaches for assistance should be considered to-address the long-term impacts of COVID-19?

8.2 What new activities should be considered to-address the long-term impacts of COVID-19?

9. EMPOWERING WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

9.1 In what ways can development activities empower and engage Women to play a role in the recovery from COVID-19?

9.2 In what unique ways might women strengthen resilience to future shocks?

9.3 In what ways can development activities empower and engage disadvantaged groups to play a role in the recovery from COVID-19?

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION TOOL

INTRODUCTION (TO BE USED FOR ALL FGDS INCLUDING IPS AND NPAS)

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you for having us here today. I am _____ and this is my colleague _____. We are an external independent team hired by the USAID/Lao PDR Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Support activity. We are not affiliated directly with USAID nor with the implementing partners. This interview is part of the USAID/Lao PDR COVID-19 Assessment.

This focus group discussion will take about 90 minutes (NPs)/two hours (IPs), and your participation is voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate. I will be conducting the interview while my colleague takes down notes. During the interview we will ask questions about:

1. The current impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic
2. Potential short-term and medium-term consequences of COVID-19
3. Your recommendations for how USAID can respond in the future

Our focus group discussion (FGD) will focus on some specific questions where we would like your professional views. There are no wrong or right answers as the input provided is unique and this effort is part of a learning process. You do not have to answer any question you do not wish to and please ask for clarification if there is any question that you do not understand. You can also choose to end the FGD at any time you wish to, without any consequences to you or anyone else involved in the project. If you start the FGD and wish to stop at any time for any reason, or if you don't want to answer any questions, you may do so without penalty. No action is required to withdraw from or refuse to participate in the study, other than to inform the evaluator of your decision.

Only the research team will know your identity and we will not share any identifiable information with USAID or anyone else. Your answers will be combined with others' responses and reported in the aggregate in the final report with general identifiers like respondent group and sex. Any information you provide that might identify you, will be kept confidential to the fullest extent under local law and U.S. Government policy.

We would like to have your permission to record the FGD for reference purpose. If during the FGD, you wish to share something confidential/off-the-record please let us know and we will stop the recording.

Do you have any questions about this interview?

Are you willing to participate in this interview? Yes _____ No _____

Consent for the interview to be recorded? Yes _____ No _____

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE - IPS

META DATA

Reference:

Sector²⁴:

Type of Organization: IP

Name	Position	Gender

Date of FGD:

If questions are not applicable, mark accordingly

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION

1. THESE QUESTIONS DEAL WITH THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON YOUR ACTIVITY

1.1 In what areas has COVID-19 affected your activity strategically the most (e.g. effects on stakeholders, beneficiaries and changing priorities)?

2. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN YOUR ACTIVITY AND ON PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED²⁵ GROUPS

2.1 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected women including challenges and changing needs, in your activity?

2.2 Has your activity identified specific needs of women in relation to COVID-19 and implemented mitigating action?

2.3 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected people from disadvantaged groups including challenges and changing needs in your activity?

2.4 Has your activity identified specific needs of disadvantaged groups in relation to COVID-19 and implemented mitigating action?

3. NOT RELEVANT

4. LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4.1 How has your activity responded to these effects and challenges? (workplans, new approaches to implementation, modified and/or new tasks)?

4.2 What plans, tasks or approaches have worked well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

4.3 What has not worked so well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

4.4 Can you provide any examples of best practices or lessons learned based on the response from GOL, Development partners or NPAs/ INGOs?

RECOMMENDATIONS

7. RESPONSE OF USAID ACTIVITIES TO THE SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19

7.1 What changes to your activity (new approaches, tasks, scope) are required to respond in the short-term to address the issues and needs?

7.2 What changes to your activity (new approaches, tasks, scope) are required in the medium-term to address the issues and needs given the unique nature and focus of each program?

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE – NPAS (GENDER AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS)

META DATA

Reference:

Sector²⁸:

Type of Organizations: IP/NPA

Position	Organization	Gender

Date of FGD:

If questions are not applicable, mark accordingly. The questions focus on key sectors like health, education, economic growth, energy, environment

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT SITUATION

1. NOT RELEVANT

2. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND ON PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED²⁹ GROUPS

2.1 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected women in your activities?

2.2 How has COVID-19 uniquely affected people from disadvantaged groups including challenges and changing needs in your activity?

3. RESPONSE

3.1 What mitigating action has been implemented so far to address these challenges and needs of women by your organization?

3.2 What mitigating action has been implemented so far to address these challenges and needs of disadvantaged groups by your organization?

4. LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR FROM THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4.1 What plans, tasks or approaches have worked well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

4.2 What has not worked so well in the response to COVID-19 and why?

IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19

5. NOT RELEVANT

6. SHORT-TERM AND MEDIUM-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

6.1 What are the potential short-term and medium-term consequences of Covid-19 on women in key sectors like health, education, economic growth, environment (e.g. issues, needs) ?

6.2 What are the potential short-term and medium-term consequences of Covid-19 on disadvantaged groups in key sectors like health, education, economic growth, environment (e.g. issues, needs)?

6.3 What are the key gaps in terms of future programmes to support women and disadvantaged groups?

RECOMMENDATIONS

7. NOT RELEVANT

8. NOT RELEVANT

9. EMPOWERING WOMEN AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

9.1 In what ways can future activities empower and engage women to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID-19?

9.2 In what ways can future activities empower and engage disadvantaged groups to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID-19?

ANNEX 5: SCOPE OF WORK

USAID LAO PDR COVID-19 ASSESSMENT – SERVICE REQUEST

PURPOSE

Entering the COVID-19 crisis, Lao PDR sought to graduate from Least Developed Country status by 2024. Achieving that goal now will require robust support from development partners. Through this assessment, the USAID seeks to target assistance that demonstrates its commitment to a strong, prosperous, and independent Lao PDR at the heart of ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region – and place in stark relief the transactional predatory lending, dubious investments, and heavy-handed diplomatic practices offered by the revisionist PRC.

The purpose is to provide a cross-sectoral analysis of the health and socio-economic challenges USAID and its implementing partners in Lao PDR face due to COVID-19. This would cover the key consequences of COVID-19 on USAID's activities in Lao PDR, recommendations about adjustments to existing activities in the short and long term, and potential areas for future engagement.

BACKGROUND

The international community relies on official government numbers of COVID-19 reporting, with only 41 total cases reported out of a population of seven million. From its own account, the government is focused on testing incoming international arrivals and not focused on potential internal transmission. In April, both Vietnam and Thailand each reported substantial increases in COVID-19 cases, while Lao PDR reported a handful of new cases; yet 75 percent of the country shares land borders with these two countries. Lao PDR also shares a 238 km border with Burma/Myanmar which has seen a significant increase in COVID-19 cases since early September 2020. USAID Lao PDR cannot say with any certainty the low numbers being reported by the Lao PDR government are complete.

Despite the low number of reported cases, the impacts of COVID-19 have been felt deeply. Lao PDR has the least developed health care system in the region, with less capacity and fewer resources to handle the needed prevention and response of potential subsequent waves of the novel coronavirus pandemic. The donor community is already tracking reduced availability of routine health care services in the provinces, with evidence of a reduction in the number of vaccinations being administered and reduced community outreach for maternal and child health services. Anecdotal information suggests a considerable increase in mental health problems as well.

Moreover, all indications are that the economic and social impacts have been significant. According to World Bank analyses, the pandemic has severely affected economic growth, which will decline to an estimated range of between -0.6 to -2.4 percent in 2020. The service sector has been hit hard by lockdown measures, overseas remittances have dried up, the unemployment rate rose to 25 percent in May 2020, and international tourism has essentially stopped due to border closures. A growing fiscal deficit will constrain the Lao government's ability to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and service its very high level of public debt. According to the UN, large portions of the population are facing food insecurity, especially in rural areas, and 1.7 million schoolchildren have had their learning set back.

USAID's portfolio of programs in Lao PDR covers a wide range of areas including health, basic education, the business environment, rule of law, combating trafficking in persons, energy security, and assisting people with disabilities, with gender and inclusion as a cross-cutting issue. Consequently, the current and potential impacts of COVID-19 are crucial factors in how USAID can move Lao PDR along its path to self-reliance while addressing the immediate challenges created by COVID-19.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED:

Analysis of Situation

1. Current situation: What does the literature say about the current impact of COVID on Lao PDR?
2. What are the lessons learned so far in Lao PDR and in the region about responding to and recovering from the health and socio-economic impact of COVID? (literature review and interviews with USAID implementing partners)
3. How have the Government of Lao PDR and development partners responded so far and what gaps remain? (literature review)
4. Implications of Covid: What do published sources and key informants say about the potential short and long-term consequences of the pandemic? (literature review)
5. How could such consequences affect each of USAID's activities in health, governance, education, economic growth, and energy? (literature review and interviews with USAID implementing partners)
6. What are the most common recommendations proposed by the literature and key informants in Lao PDR and surrounding countries, especially related to sectors in the USAID portfolio? (literature review and interviews with USAID implementing partners)
7. What unique impacts has COVID had on women in Lao PDR? What have been the unique reactions/responses of women in Lao PDR to the impacts of COVID? How about people from ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations? (literature review and interviews with implementing partners)

Recommendations

8. How can each USAID's activities respond in the short and longer term to address these gaps given the unique nature and focus of each program? (interviews with USAID implementing partners)?
9. How is USAID positioned to support emerging opportunities in Lao PDR resulting from the pandemic? (e.g. new opportunities for digitalization are emerging and USAID's Lao Business Environment activity already contains an emphasis on ICT in its existing agreement.)
10. What new investments or interventions should USAID consider to address the long term impacts of COVID, including contributions to existing, under resourced programs already underway by the various UN agencies and development partners? (literature review and interviews with UN agencies and other development partners)
11. In what ways can USAID activities empower and uplift women in Lao PDR to play a role in the country's recovery from COVID, and to ensure better preparation for a similar crisis in the future? What unique benefits or opportunities might women bring to Lao PDR's resilience?
12. In what ways can USAID activities empower people from ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and any other relevant vulnerable populations, to play a role in the country's COVID recovery and future preparation? What unique benefits or opportunities might these communities bring to Lao PDR's resilience?

DELIVERABLES

1. A literature review including relevant reports, studies, and evaluations produced by outside sources or USAID, including strategies produced by the Lao People's Democratic Republic and other donors and multilateral organizations;
2. Qualitative analysis of the experiences of USAID/Lao PDR' implementing partners, including a review of activity deliverables such as quarterly and annual reports, sector mappings, and activity-specific assessments;
3. Qualitative analysis of the experiences of international donors, international NGOs, civil society organizations, and/or members of the business community;
4. A summary data and key findings package with key statistics and findings by sector based on the resources included in the literature review and consultation qualitative analysis, which

must include a section that discusses these findings in relationship to the Lao PDR Journey to Self-Reliance Country Roadmap, as well as a section that examines the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and opportunities and recommendations for USAID programming that promotes inclusive social and economic recovery;

5. Facilitation of learning sessions and of a workshop where USAID Lao PDR staff and implementing partners will review the findings; and
6. Documentation of learning and progress and suggestions to update the USAID Lao PDR Programming Approach.
7. A summary brief (2-page) synthesis of the assessment approach and key findings that are relevant for potential sharing with Lao PDR counterparts.

TEAM COMPOSITION

The contractor will provide a six-person team. The contractor/team composition, at a minimum, must comprise both sexes.

- **Lead Facilitator:** A senior-level development specialist with appropriate educational level and work experience. The team leader must have at least five years of experience leading strategy development, facilitating cross-sectoral workshops, and building consensus. The lead facilitator must also be an excellent English speaker and writer. Familiarity with USAID ADS (Automated Directive Systems) Chapter 201 and the proposed changes with regards to the strategy development process—including the Journey to Self-Reliance, Clear Choice, and other significant Agency initiatives—is required. The lead facilitator must have a good understanding of development issues in Lao PDR. The lead facilitator will coordinate the team, ensuring team members understand their roles and responsibilities, and ensure the quality and timeliness of deliverables.
- **Co-Facilitator:** A mid-level development specialist with appropriate educational level and work experience. The co-facilitator must have at least three years of experience leading strategy development, facilitating cross-sectoral workshops, and building consensus. The co-facilitator must also be an excellent English speaker and writer. Familiarity with USAID ADS Chapter 201 and the proposed changes with regards to the strategy development process is required. The co-facilitator must have a good understanding of development issues in Lao PDR. The co-facilitator will collaborate with the lead facilitator to plan and implement the learning sessions and workshop to support USAID/Lao PDR' programming approach.
- **Researchers:** Two mid-level experts with experience conducting research on development topics including, but not limited to, democracy and governance, agricultural development and food security, environment, education, health, youth issues, gender equality, inclusive development, private sector engagement, and technological innovations. In addition, the researchers must have experience and knowledge of the Lao PDR context. It is preferable for at least one of the researchers to be living in Lao PDR. The team should have at least one candidate with expertise on gender and inclusive development issues in the Lao PDR context, including gender norms and how gender interacts with other identity elements. Both researchers must have strong English language skills in both written and verbal communications. At least one researcher must have strong Lao language skills.
- **Notetakers:** Two notetakers with excellent organizational, synthesizing, and analysis skills. The note takers must have experience supporting strategic planning. The notetakers must also be familiar with USAID ADS 201 and USAID strategy and program design principles. The notetakers should also possess a knowledge of development issues and actors in the Lao PDR context. Both notetakers must have strong Lao PDR and English language skills in both written and verbal communications.

SCHEDULE

The timeframe is January 2021 to May 16, 2021. Tentative dates are listed below but may be amended depending on the needs of USAID/Lao PDR. Dates are based on a six-day work week.

ACTIVITY	TENTATIVE DATES	TEAM MEMBERS
Literature Review Update	January 13-18	2 Researchers
Consultation data analysis and synthesis	January 21-January 31	2 Researchers
Interview each USAID Lao PDR implementing partner		2 Researchers
Data package consolidation	February 1-8	2 Researchers
Preparation and implementation of learning sessions and RF workshop	April 27-May 8	2 Facilitators and 2 Notetakers
Documentation of RF development	May 9-16	2 Facilitators and 2 Notetakers

ROLE OF THE USAID MISSION

USAID/Lao PDR will provide the AT with:

- A list of key documents to be included in the Literature Review Update; however, the researchers should not limit their review only to this list;
- Key background documents from USAID activities, portfolio reviews, assessments, strategies, current programming, Lao PDR Journey to Self-Reliance Roadmap and other relevant learning documents, and the USAID Programming Approach
- Contact information for each USAID implementing partner
- A list of key agencies, implementing partners, and donors to be contacted for participation in interviews and/or focal groups;
- Review and feedback on all deliverables;
- Close coordination with and regular updates, particularly on the qualitative data analysis, and;
- Support to arrange internal meetings with USAID staff.